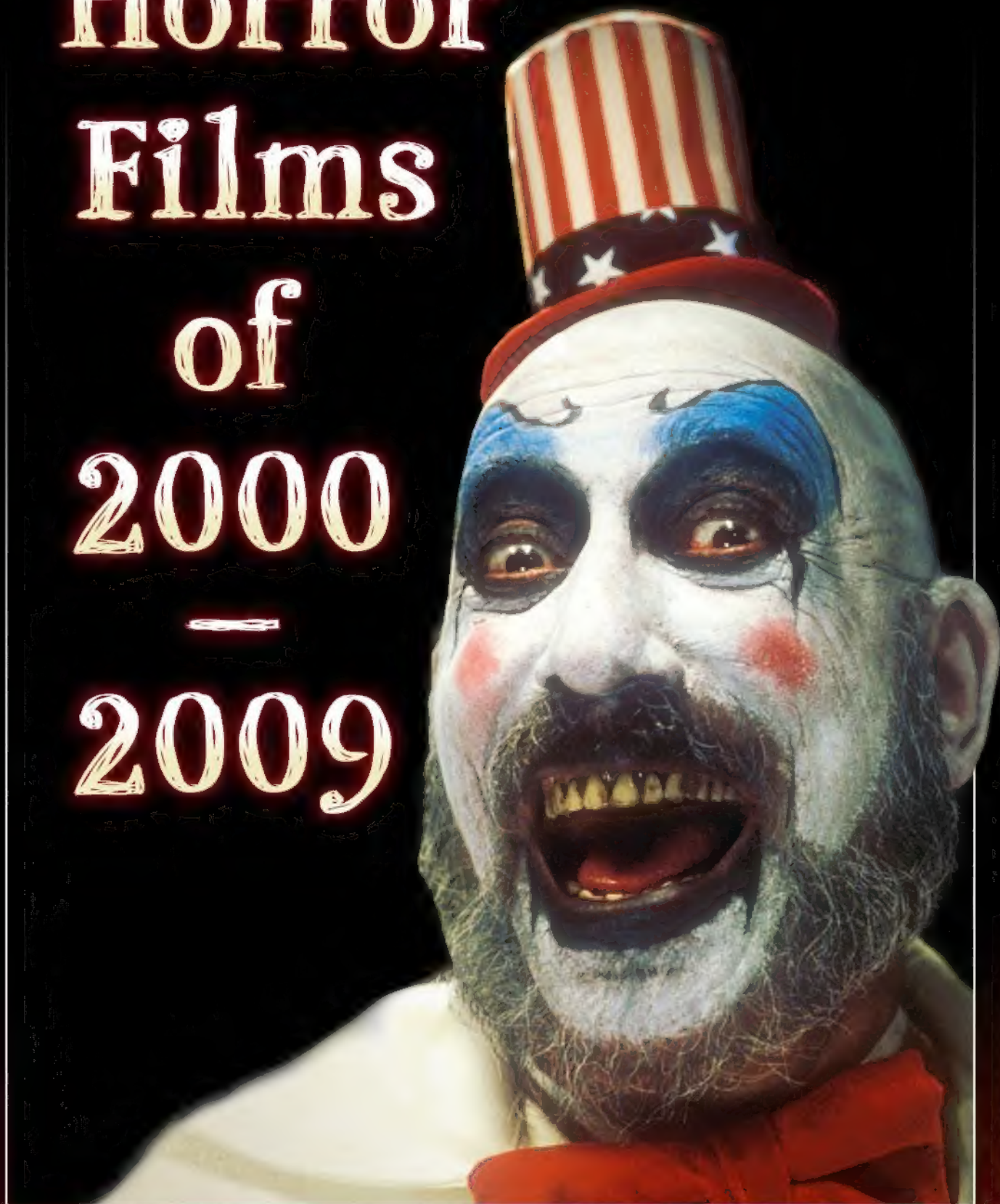


Horror
Films
of
2000
—
2009



John Kenneth Muir

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Front cover: Sid Haig (as Captain Spaulding) in *House of 1000 Corpses*, 2003 (Lion's Gate/Photofest)

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Preface

To alter slightly a line of dialogue from *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), horror films represent “the great white shark of our unconscious.”

And it’s time to go swimming again.

I return to you—writing in the age of pandemic—with this volume, my fourth horror decade survey book from the good folks at McFarland. The book you now hold in your hands, *Horror Films of the 2000s*, follows the award-winning *Horror Films of the 1970s* (2002), *Horror Films of the 1980s* (2007), and *Horror Films of the 1990s* (2011).

This book surveys approximately 315 movies from the first decade of the 21st century, the War on Terror Age, and provides a thumbnail history of that epoch. As was the case in my previous decade surveys, the films included herein are dated by the year of *American wide theatrical release or direct-to-video release*, not the year of limited release or copyright.

This organization decision differentiates these books from the useful and long-lived Internet Movie Database, which lists films by their copyright date. As noted in *Horror Films of the 1990s*, the movie-going experience forges indelible memories. Audience members recall the occasion, date and season during which they first experienced a film in the theater. They recall a summer movie from a summer viewing, not six or nine months previous to their first encounter with it. These big decade books attempt to recreate, after a fashion, the “time” of the movies and the world around these releases, so this organization by release date hopefully makes intuitive sense to readers.

In terms of scope, *Horror Films of the 2000s* highlights representative horror films released theatrically and direct-to-video from the year 2000 through the year 2009. Important films from Japan, France, Korea, Great Britain, and other nations are included throughout the text as well. A look at these films is especially important in this particular decade as Japanese Horror and the New French Extremism influenced American horror filmmaking in myriad ways. But as before, the book’s approach is America-centric. Made-for-TV films or so-called TV movies, as before, are not included.

Also, a bit of special pleading: please understand the use of the word “representative” above. This book attempts to be thorough but does not include every title ever. In part, that is so because not every fan or academician even agrees on what qualities define horror. What one reader may see as an oversight, another might see as a fantasy film, and therefore not the purview of this text.

The films are further organized in the text by alphabetical order within each year, and all entries follow the same formula pioneered by *Horror Films of the 1970s* so that all four of these books may be viewed as companion pieces; pieces of a larger whole, a sweeping history of horror films in the intriguing last decades of the 20th century and turbulent first decade of the 21st century. Each entry features a cast and crew tally, a synopsis and a detailed commentary.

Readers will also find, as before, a “Timeline” at the start of each year of review, as a reminder of what was happening in the larger world alongside the release of the surveyed horror films. At the heart of all these books is the notion that current events shape art or that art imitates life. Therefore, movies cannot be fully understood and appreciated unless viewed with an understanding of their historical context. Put short and sweet: context explains to us why a film looks and sounds as it does.

Some readers decry that these decade books discuss politics all, but the fact is that all art is political. Accordingly, all horror films are political. And they all relate directly to the world in which they were forged. Going back to the formation of film as an art form, the horror genre has never been *not* political, and that certainly doesn’t change with the horror films of the 2000s.

Or to quote *Scream 3* (2000), “pop culture is the politics of the 21st century.”

No doubt some readers will tire of reading about the “post 9/11” world in this book, yet it would be derelict not to consider how the horror film changed following a devastating terrorist attack on American soil.

As before, I am not alone in my journey through a decade of horror films. To quote a tagline from *Aliens* (1986), there are some places in the universe you shouldn’t go alone. This time, I have four stellar guest

critics to offer their commentary on many of the films of this decade.

These horror rock stars are (in alphabetical order):

William Latham: Bill Latham has been writing capsules of horror films since the first book in this series, *Horror Films of the 1970s*, twenty years ago. He is also the author of a number of novels including *Mary's Monster* (1999) and several officially licensed novels based on the TV series *Space: 1999* (1975–1977).

Stacie Ponder: Stacie Ponder is a writer, artist, and podcast host whose work focuses on horror movies and horror video games. In addition to her long-running, critically acclaimed blog *Final Girl*, her work has appeared in numerous publications and websites.

Jonas Schwartz: Jonas is a contributing film critic to *TheaterMania*, *Broadway World*, *Arts in LA*, and this author's blog, *Reflections on Film and Television*. Jonas is also the author of *10ve: A Binary Love Story*.

Alexandra West: Alex's work has appeared in *The Toronto Star*, *Rue Morgue*, *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, and *Shock Till You Drop*. Her books *Films of New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity* (2016) and *The 1990s Teen*

Horror Cycle: Final Girls and New Hollywood Formula (2018) are available from McFarland.

The critical reception section for each film, where these capsules are found, also include representative reviews from other critics. In this case, the author has included not just magazine and newspaper reviews, but excerpts of horror blogs and sites, which proliferated in the 2000s and commented meaningfully on the genre.

The synopsis, of course, is a short recounting of a film's plot. In some cases, there are spoilers in the synopsis, so that narrative and theme can be discussed in the commentary. The commentary section is my detailed analysis of the film in the spotlight. As before, I have rated the films on a four-star system, with four meaning "great," three stars meaning "good," two stars being "average" and one star and under being "poor." The two-and-half-star writing is simply authorial waffling, a film that is almost good but not quite so. Some readers may draw that line differently.

Finally, readers will find several appendices at the end of the book that, as before, categorize genre conventions or tropes, look at oft-seen performers, catalog tag or ad lines for the films covered, and a personal selection of the ten greatest horror films of the 2000s.

Happy reading ... and see you for the 2010s!

I

Whoever Wins, We Lose: An Introduction

The American horror movie has always known what scares us.

Two further statements help the reader understand the American horror film format during the turbulent first decade of the 21st century.

The first statement, written in this author's *Horror Films of the 1970s*, and repeated in each succeeding text in this survey series, is simply that art always reflects life. By this, the author means only that one cannot hope to meaningfully interpret any work of art without understanding the time period from which it sprang. Historical context is the key to unlocking the meaning and nature of horror films.

There are many horror films fans who would prefer not to linger on politics, or presidents, or foreign policy in an examination of the genre. Yet, artists consciously and unconsciously mirror what they witness happening in the world around them, so current events and politics are inexorably linked to horror films. Why interpret horror films at all if not to link them to the boogeymen and dreads that lurk in the culture?

The horror cinema of the 2000s obsessed on terrorism, technology, and fate, to name three obsessions of the era. Of the three hundred plus films featured in this book, the majority contend with at least one of these concepts.

The second statement of vital interest in this survey

of the horror films of the aughts is simply that bad times make for good horror films.

The 1970s, the disco-decade era of Nixon's impeachment, the Vietnam War, the Three Mile Island Disaster, the Iranian revolution, and OPEC oil embargoes, gave the world such undisputed masterpieces as *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) and *Halloween* (1978).

The apocalypse, Cold War mentality of Reagan's conservative, yupified 1980s, as well as the rise of AIDS and a burgeoning national debt, generated classics like *The Thing* (1982), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and more.

However, following



No matter who wins, we lose! The Predator (left) comes face to face with the xenomorph (right) in *AVP* (2004) or *Alien vs. Predator*.

the first Iraq War in the 1990s, came an economic boom in America under President Bill Clinton. This era also saw the rise of the Internet, and of the dot.coms. Peace and prosperity were the order of the decade, and horror movies didn't know exactly where to turn in an era that lifted all boats.

Serial killers? Interlopers? Self-reflexive neo-slashers?

At the same time, a brilliant genre TV series, *The X-Files* (1993–2002), began to dramatize well-shot, effective horror narratives each week during the decade. Why drive to a theater and pay top dollar to see a new horror movie, when *The X-Files* could be enjoyed from home, and watched for free?

Where was the horror movie headed at the dawn of the new millennium?

In the largest, most sustained economic expansion and “*peacetime boom*”¹ in American history, thanks to the commercial engine known as the Internet, was there still a place, still a role, for dark cinematic entertainment and creepy imaginings?

The widely held belief that America was safe and secure, and that even party politics didn't matter in an

age of plenty played out in unusual fashion in the Presidential election of 2000. Vice President Al Gore, a fact-based number cruncher and wooden “*policy wonk*,” and Governor George W. Bush of Texas, an incurious, born-again Christian who couldn't name prominent world leaders, were candidates for the highest office of the land. Although these candidates were incredibly different in demeanor, knowledge, and belief systems, the overwhelming feeling of the American populace nonetheless was that the men were pretty much the same. So, the winner of the contest ultimately didn't really seem to matter much.

The 2000 election was not about war and peace, Social Security, or universal health care. Instead, Election 2000 was about, literally, which candidate you would rather share a beer with.

This is not a joke.

A poll conducted by Sam Adams Beer on October 17, 2000, found that more Americans would enjoy a beer with Bush (by a margin of 40 percent to 37 percent) than with Gore. Gore did, however, beat out Bush with women on the same question, in the same poll, by 5 percentage points.² One in five voters was undecided between the two men as election day neared, and PBS maintained an undecided voter log that captures the minutiae and unimportance of the election. Undecided voter Kim Pipple wrote in this undecided voter log: “*If I need a teammate for a game of Trivial Pursuit, I'd want Al Gore to be my partner. If I wanted to relax and enjoy myself after the game was over, I'd seek out George Bush.*”³

The “beer” presidential election of 2000 question came up again, coincidentally, five days before Election Day, when the mainstream press broke the story that Bush had once plead guilty to driving a vehicle under the influence of alcohol, when he was thirty years old.⁴ Since he was running on “*restoring honor and dignity*” to the White House after the stain of Clinton's 1999 impeachment over the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the revelation of his own indiscretion didn't play well with the American people, and the candidate lost ground in the polls.

As a result, perhaps, of this late revelation, Election Night 2000 was a nail biter. The contest was bitterly fought, and no winner was announced. Instead, there seemed to be voting logjam in Florida, which would give its winner 29 electoral votes. Florida also happened to be the state where Bush's brother, Jeb, served as governor, and Katherine Harris was Secretary of State ... and a Bush campaign co-chair.

Recounts were held in heavily Democratic counties as Al Gore attempted to close the 537-vote gap representing George W. Bush's lead. Unwilling to see those recounts succeed, Republican operatives launched the



Evil will fight evil—two more cinematic monsters go head to head in the 2000s. This time, it's Krueger (Robert Englund, left) vs. Voorhees (Ken Kirzinger, right) in *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003).



Two more evils duke it out: The Pred-alien (left) and a Predator (right) are up for a rematch in *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem* (2007).

Brooks Brothers Riot on November 22, 2000, to disrupt the counts. Among those protesting at this “spontaneous” demonstration were several well-known political operatives, including “dirty tricks” master, Roger Stone,⁵ later a campaign manager for Donald Trump.

Finally, the Supreme Court of the United States stopped the recounts with a controversial decision, *Bush v. Gore*. The court justices who had been nominated for the court by George W. Bush’s father, President George H. Walker Bush just a decade earlier, did not recuse themselves from the case, and voted in W’s favor. After the Supreme Court forestalled further avenues to determine the accuracy of the Florida vote count, Al Gore conceded the election on December 13, 2000, stating “Almost a century and a half ago, Sen. Stephen Douglas told Abraham Lincoln, who had just defeated him for the presidency, ‘Partisan feeling must yield to patriotism. I’m with you, Mr. President, and God bless you.’ Well, in that same spirit, I say to President-elect Bush that what remains of partisan rancor must now be put aside, and may God bless his stewardship of this country.”⁶

George W. Bush became President of the United States on January 20, 2001, though some voters still referred to him as “*The Commander and Thief*” and protested his inauguration by throwing eggs at his motorcade.⁷ Overall, however, the American people hardly seemed bothered that not all the votes had been

accurately counted. Again, most Americans felt like there simply wasn’t that much at stake, or much difference between the country’s two political parties.

The 21st century was going to be another American century, it seemed certain.

What did Americans even have to fear anymore?

The unfortunate answer to that question arrived on Tuesday, September 11, 2001. Radical Islamic terrorists working in an organization called Al Qaeda, under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, used hijacked airliners to attack America. They flew their planes into buildings and brought down the World Trade Center in New York. One of the planes struck the Pentagon in VA. And the last plane went down in a field in Pennsylvania, after brave American citizens sought to retake control of the cockpit.



George W. Bush, 43rd President of the United States.

News footage of the attacks repeated endlessly, for days, on 24-hour news cable stations such as Fox, MSNBC and CNN. Americans saw grieving family members searching in vain for the missing, presumed dead, from the Towers. They also witnessed conspicuous courage from first responders, working at the scene of the crime in Manhattan, which became known as Ground Zero.

President Bush, addressing the U.S. Congress, and the American people, remarked upon the unprecedented nature of the terrorist strike on September 20, 2001: *"Americans have known surprise attacks, but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day, and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack."*⁸

America had suddenly been dragged into the 21st century, against her will, and now, it must be stated there was much to fear.

Under President George W. Bush, America launched a new, sweeping Global War on Terror. It was a campaign that, in keeping with the so-called Bush Doctrine, would authorize pre-emptive attacks against any state that harbored or helped terrorists. Those countries who did so, he declared, were either with us, or with the terrorists.

After a War in Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, which failed to capture the terrorist mastermind, Bin Laden, the Bush Administration set its sight on a second theater in the War on Terror: Iraq. The motivation for this war was the fear that secular dictator Saddam Hussein was gathering weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that he would use to attack America. Administration officials went out to the media, including National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and commented that they didn't want *"the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud"* over American cities.⁹

America's new culture of fear had arrived in force, nuclear Armageddon included.

In March of 2003, The Bush Administration launched a pre-emptive war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, even though it had no verifiable links to Al Qaeda, or the 9/11 terror attacks. A Pentagon report issued in 2007, as well as the September 11 Commission report, "found no evidence of a collaborative relationship between Saddam and Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda network."¹⁰ Instead, it was part of an "Axis of Evil," and marked for invasion.



The 9/11 terrorist attacks brought a shift in TV programming. Programs that were suspicious of the Federal government and posited global conspiracies, like the popular *The X-Files* (1993–2002) starring Gillian Anderson and David Duchovny, came to an end in favor of more overtly patriotic fare.

America seemed to change overnight after 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terror.

A draconian Patriot Act was passed by Congress, and the Department of Homeland Security, a vast new bureaucracy, was created to defend the nation. The American populace was suddenly conditioned to the new culture of fear by the arrival of a color-coded terror threat chart. This colored-coded chart would tell Americans when to be afraid, or, actually, very afraid.

Green meant low risk of terror attack. Blue meant general risk of Terrorist Attack. Yellow meant elevated risk. Orange meant high risk, and Red blared severe risk of terrorist attack. Years after the 2002 initiation of this system, the first Homeland Security Secretary, Tom Ridge, reported that *"he was pressured by other members of George W. Bush's Cabinet to raise the terror alert just before the 2004 presidential election."*¹¹

America under Bush also found itself chipping away at old international alliances, as it pushed for its War on Terror, particularly the Iraq War. When the Administration couldn't gain support from traditional allies such as France and Germany for a pre-emptive attack there, those allies were dismissed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld as *"Old Europe"*¹² In one especially ridiculous move, a protest arose in America to change the name of French fries to *"Freedom fries"* to snub France.

Once the war in Iraq was started, new controversies

swelled. There were reports of Americans torturing prisoners, for example, in Abu Ghraib prison, in 2004. The torturers were dismissed by Bush as *"a few bad apples."*¹³ Others, including prominent civil rights and constitutional lawyers saw the abusive and illegal behavior as clearly stemming from the fact that the Attorney General of the United States under Bush, Alberto Gonzales, *"authorized some of we've been talking about, some of these torture techniques. So you have essentially, a hermetic system, closed in terms of any accountability."*¹⁴

Much horror followed the 9/11 attacks and the initiation of the War on Terror. There was a terrorist attack using anthrax, still unsolved and unprosecuted as of this writing. Then came the Washington Beltway Snipers. In 2001, the Enron Economic collapse occurred.

In 2005 came the drowning of an American City, New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina and a failed government response. Nearly two thousand Americans died as a result of this natural disaster and its aftermath.¹⁵

And, last but not least was the Great Economic Collapse of 2008. This financial crisis was the worst economic disaster since the Great Depression.¹⁶ Unemployment swelled to 10 percent, with 15 million Americans out of work, by 2009.¹⁷



After the September 11th attacks, TV series such as *24* (2001–2008), starring Kiefer Sutherland as Agent Jack Bauer, became popular. The series was controversial for its suggestion that torture was a successful interrogation technique.

This is just a God's Eye overview of the upheavals that created tumult in America and across the globe during the aughts.

But remember the second statement, above, about the nature of the horror genre. Bad times make good horror movies. It's as though the horror film needs something controversial, provocative, or at the very least, unknown, to occur in the culture for the format to truly reach its zenith of creativity and social relevance.

And that is precisely what happened in the decade of the aughts. Bad times fueled visions of unparalleled darkness and terror at American cinemas. But these visions, importantly, were also a mirror, showing America its true nature though the prisms of war, recession, natural disaster, and a red state/blue state partisan divide that threatened to shake the U.S.A. apart.

For example, the 9/11 attacks and ensuing War on Terror forged a whole new wave of horror films that involved innocent travelers take a wrong turn into terror. The road trip gone awry or "detour" horror film was a format already well-established before the 21st century, but 9/11 infused it with a new relevance. After the terrorist attacks, Americans too felt like they had taken a detour into an alternate reality, one in which their illusions about safety, security, or prosperity were all shattered.

Just as American workers had gone to work in Manhattan on a seemingly normal September morning in 2001 only to be faced with horrific choices (burn to death in the towers, or jump to their deaths, from a high floor in the towers...), so were the protagonists of these film, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Wrong Turn* (2003), *Wolf Creek* (2005), and *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) forced to make consequential choices about their lives that had not even been in consideration when they awoke that day.

Many of those road trip terrors also involved the concept of *blowback*, a term first used by the CIA in 1954. It describes a process, simply, of people receiving a horrific comeuppance because of their previous actions or behavior. This notion of blowback also played out on the international stage as American culpability for the 9/11 attacks was examined. Many pundits saw the attacks as an act stemming from its long-standing imperialistic foreign policy in the Middle East. *"...[W]e are badly mistaken if we think that we in the United States are entirely blameless" for 9/11 wrote Chalmers Johnson in "Blowback," for The Nation on September 27, 2001. "The suicidal assassins of September 11, 2001, did not 'attack America,' as our political leaders and the news media like to maintain, they attacked American foreign policy."*¹⁸

In the remake of *The Hills Have Eyes*, for instance, the antagonistic cannibal family became mutated and scarred when the United States government had

conducted atom-bomb testing on their homes, in the early part of the 20th century. Economic shutdowns in rural areas, blowback from American domestic policy, generated the terrors of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Wrong Turn*, landing murderous blowback at the feet of the unsuspecting, wayward travelers.

Not only are these films about people taking a “wrong turn” into terror, but specifically about them paying the price for policies conducted in their name, if not by their permission. The road trip gone wrong films of the 2000s echoed America’s experience leading up to September 11, 2001. The country was driving along, enjoying the ride, musing about which presidential candidate to share a beer with. They believed that life was safe and secure. But as they soon learned, there were landmines ahead.

The Bush Administration’s policies and actions regarding prisoners of war in the Iraq War on and War on Terror led to another notable trend in American horror films of the 2000s: “torture porn,” or films in which protagonists are sadistically made to suffer harm to body and soul. Via the writing of White House counsel (and later Attorney General) Alberto Gonzales and also John Yoo, America opted out of the “quaint” Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners in wartime, objecting to them on the basis that the terrorists were not soldiers in a traditional conflict.¹⁹

This new approach opened the doorway to the usage of “enhanced interrogation techniques” on prisoners in American custody. “Enhanced interrogation techniques” was a euphemism, for torture.

On TV, the hit series *24*, starring Kiefer Sutherland, also transformed the horror of torture into a heroic and patriotic occupation. Sutherland played Jack Bauer, a counter-terrorist expert who, in order to prevent another 9/11 styled terrorist attack, resorted to the torture of his enemies, and his prisoners. The worst part of this fictional storytelling was that in *24*, the torture worked, and America received the information needed to prevent more large scale attack. In real life, the evidence suggested the contrary. A 6,000-page report to Congress, filed in 2014 by Glenn Carle, suggested that the CIA’s “harsh methods” during the War on Terror “failed to glean any intelligence not available through softer tactics.”²⁰ By indulging in torture in reality, and in popular entertainment like *24*, the national bloodlust for revenge was at least partly sated, without actually being an efficacious process for intelligence gathering.

America’s new obsession with water-boarding and other forms of torture reached its crescendo when on April 30, 2004, reporter Seymour M. Hersh broke a story about the treatment of prisoners by the U.S. Military at a prison in Iraq called Abu Ghraib. (Seymour M.

Hersh: *The New Yorker*: “Torture at Abu Ghraib,” April 30, 2004); There, prisoners had been stripped naked, sexually humiliated, and otherwise been subject to the enhanced techniques of the so-called Torture Memos.²¹

The torture porn horror movies of the 2000s found Americans suffering another form of blowback. The protagonists in these films were brutalized and maimed by insidious foreign agents in efforts such as *Hostel* (2005), and *Hostel II* (2007). Other films, including *Otis* (2008) found Americans doing the torture themselves—to fellow Americans—as a kind of “monkey see, monkey do” response to the pop culture and the tacit approval of the Bush Administration’s approach to interrogation.

The popular *Saw* movies likewise saw Americans tortured and having to choose between “evils” (like losing a family member or cutting off one’s own foot at the ankle). This was an acknowledgment perhaps, that America was not going to survive the 2000s and the War on Terror without losing pieces of herself.

Here’s the ironic thing about torture porn horror films and the aughts, however. It quickly became the most derided sub genre of horror films since the Moral Majority (and Roger Ebert’s) sustained attacks on the slasher films of the 1980s. Torture porn was attacked in America as disgusting, immoral, and perverse, even by some horror-loving writers in the genre blogger.

Yet, again, it is important to remember the historical context. America had legalized torture and practiced it at Abu Ghraib and other locations. The series *24* had popularized it, to great ratings. The blockbuster religious epic, *Passion of the Christ* (2004), even sanctified it, in a sense. When horror films explored the morality of torture, and depicted its horrific and traumatic effects, however, they were attacked and ridiculed, not lauded for commenting on the society that had, clearly chosen to condone the activity as the price for liberty. A country that tortured, a country that watched torture for pleasure, did not want to be confronted, apparently, with the actual moral implications of that activity.

Ronald Reagan had once termed America a shining city on a hill, but in the War on Terror Culture of Fear, America appeared ready to sacrifice her ideals of freedom and justice for all, overturning international agreements about treatments of prisoners, and more. This was an acknowledgment of weakness, above all. America, the Bush Administration apparently believed, had to sacrifice the things that made the country great to beat the terrorists, and so rose the era of “*It takes evil to fight evil*” horror movies.

The 2000s feature many films in which heroes must align with “evil” forces to survive the day. The battle is no longer, as it had been traditionally, between good and evil.

Now it is just evil vs. evil.

In *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), for instance, the teenagers terrorized by Freddy Krueger worked with Jason Voorhees, the hockey-masked killer of the *Friday the 13th* series, at least briefly, to stop the more powerful dream demon. In *Alien vs. Predator* (2004), a human explorer teamed with the predators, aliens renowned for skinning their human hunting trophies, to defeat the chest-bursting, face-hugging, acid-spewing xenomorphs.

Again, the galvanizing theme of the aughts was that to win a conflict of extreme danger, like, say the War on Terror, a protagonist (for instance, America) was going to

have to work with an evil force or in league with evil to succeed in its cause. As America sold her soul to win the War on the Terror, horror movies of the era began to recognize that peace and prosperity was no longer a guarantee, and that, worse, the idea of America as being on the side of the angels was no longer operative, either.

A number of films of the era, including *High Tension* (2005), for example, positioned the monster and the final girl in the same physical body, making these identities inseparable. Good and evil were housed in the same individual

In the year of 2004, the Bush vs. John Kerry election, *Alien vs. Predators* was released, and was advertised with a line that best describes the horror films of the 2000s:

"Whoever wins, we lose."

The animated series *South Park* offered a notorious episode in that span that compared the Bush vs. Kerry contest to choosing between a "douche" or a "shit sandwich," another way of reiterating the "Whoever wins, we lose" paradigm.

How did this happen? It began to dawn on many Americans mid-decade that the soul of their country had been stained by its prosecution of the Iraq War, and like the blood on Lady Macbeth's hands was not going to easily or quickly wash off. Bush wasn't going to change course, and Kerry, in trying to beat him, felt like "*Bush Lite*," not offering the country a different or new path.

The culture of fear seemed here to stay.

A sad fact, of course, was that America had been here before, and failed to learn the lessons of the past. The Bush Administration failed to learn the difficult lessons of the Vietnam War, and so the War in Afghanistan and War in Iraq continued year after bloody year, a quagmire of sorts.

Bush also revived the mythology of the Reagan Revolution and trickle-down economics, lavishing tax cuts on the rich while breaking the American treasury.

Consider: the 2000s had a rerun Bush, a rerun foreign quagmire in Iraq, and even a rerun space shuttle



The poster art from *Cloverfield* (2008), showcasing the fact America—and New York—have been attacked again.

disaster (the 1986 *Challenger* incident vs. the 2003 *Columbia* one). Perhaps it is not a surprise then that so many of the horror films of the 2000s were “brand name” remakes of classic films, even as Bush was a “brand name” president, following the legacy of his father.

Everything old was new again (or not) in horror remakes including *The Fog* (2005), *The Omen* (2006), *Halloween* (2007) *The Hitcher* (2007), *When a Stranger Calls* (2008), *Prom Night* (2008), and more. Although many remakes did have merits as individual works of art, the War on Terror Age felt much like America was reliving its worst previous mistakes, suffering a poisonous hangover case of *deja vu*. The best of the remakes, such as Alexander Aja’s *The Hills Have Eyes* or Zack Snyder’s *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) were able to recontextualize their stories for the new traumas of the aughts.

The “*Whoever wins, we lose*” paradigm might also be seen in the other horror film trends of the 2000s. A number of movies concerned new and improved technologies coming into everyday use but failing to make life any better. This was a relevant terror, because the 2000s was the incipient era of iPhones, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, and other avenues of communication “connection.” More often than not in horror movies of the era, these technologies brought evil into the American home.

FearDotCom (2002) and *Cry_Wolf* (2005) concerned the ways evil could be housed on and proliferate across the Internet. *The Ring* (2002) concerned a haunted video tape. *Pulse* (2006) and *One Missed Call* (2008) obsessed on evil as carried through cell phones and Wi-Fi. *28 Days Later* showcased “the rage” developed in people from a constant viewing diet of Cable TV news, and *Pontypool* (2009) focused on a zombie apocalypse born by the “risky” language of talk radio. Films like *Stay Alive* (2007) obsessed on a haunted video games, and the message overall seemed to be that the new technological 21st century was a place of danger, both online and off.

We couldn’t have nice things. The nice things would kill us. So, on one hand, we had amazing new technologies, and on the other, they didn’t seem to be protecting us, or making life substantially better for Americans.

Whoever wins, we lose.

In the 2000s, another technology—the video camera—became widely available and affordable, and the way that horror movies could visualize their stories underwent a fundamental shift. Following *The Blair Witch Project*’s (1999) blockbuster success at the end of the 1990s, the found-footage horror film format took off in the 2000s, taking the “amateur” chronicler of current events into every kind of crisis imaginable.

Remember, in the hours after the 9/11 attacks, 24 hour

cable networks endlessly showcased amateur footage of the people on the ground in Manhattan, running from debris and smoke plumes, and the towers on fire.

That paradigm of the bystander capturing history was repeated ceaselessly in the aughts in such found footage efforts of the 2000s as *REC* (2007), *Diary of the Dead* (2008), and *Cloverfield* (2008) to name just a few. In these films, the technological medium was the message, to coin a phrase. The proliferation of home video camera technology meant that no event in American history would ever again go unrecorded, undocumented.

By the late 2000s, Americans had grown tired of war and economic chaos. Americans voted Republicans out in the congressional elections of 2006, and elected Barack Obama as President in 2008, but by then the damage was done. Americans had lost faith in the idea that their government could protect them or help them during a disaster.

This fear was given voice in the zombie films of the 2000s including *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *28 Weeks Later* (2007)—which was a commentary on the Iraq Occupation, *I Am Legend* (2007), *Planet Terror* (2007), *Pontypool* (2009), and *Zombieland* (2009) to name just a few of these efforts. The old monster, the zombie, had come back, but this time to represent the failure of infrastructure and bureaucracy to save the American people. In these tales, scientists, the military, the government and the media were helpless to stop an onslaught, a new order, in the American homeland. It was the fear, made manifest, of American decline in a decade in which one crisis followed the next. By and large, the zombie films represented the idea that America could no longer respond effectively to foreign attack, internal strife, or even a natural disaster.

As one can tell, there was a whole lot to be scared about in the 2000s, and the new millennium horror films went for the gusto, exploiting fear of terrorists, fear of societal collapse, fear of innovative new technology, and even fear of political blowback over decades of bad foreign policy.

For America, it was the worst of times, but for horror films, it was the best of times. The genre had once more found its voice and its purpose.

So, with these social and political currents and ideas in mind, let us return now to the decade of cargo pants and frosted lip gloss, Bratz dolls, and MySpace.

It was the era when political candidates could claim relevance by using a “noun and a verb and 9/11” in their stump speeches, and torture porn, found footage and remakes of beloved films reigned supreme in the horror genre.

Too soon?

II

The War of Terror: A Decade of Torture Porn Remakes, Zombies and Other Trends

"If you found this tape, if you're watching this right now, then you probably know more about it than I do":—Found Footage

At the end of the 1990s, the horror film genre had a new, runaway hit in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), a film that grossed hundreds of millions of dollars on a budget of approximately \$60,000 dollars. *The Blair Witch Project* utilized the "first person" approach, meaning that the cameras in the film represent the audience's vision, as well as the vision of the character who is recording the action. This technique has also been called the "diegetic camera" approach because the camera originates inside the world of the drama. What the audience sees is created, and transmitted, from inside the narrative.

Or as Peter Turner writes in *Found Footage Horror Films: A Cognitive Approach*: "The spectator's position is like that of a character immersed in the diegetic events, rather than being in the position of a more traditional invisible observer."¹

The Blair Witch Project revolutionized the horror format in many ways, though certainly one can look back to historical antecedents that attempted

something similar. These films have titles such as *Punishment Park* (1972), *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) and even *The Last Broadcast* (1998). It is accurate to describe *The Blair Witch Project* as the tipping point movie for the found footage genre, and indeed *The Blair Witch Project* succeeded on numerous fronts that made further found footage horror films desirable as a popular format.

First and foremost, of course, is the budget. One must never forget that film is simultaneously an art form, and a commercial enterprise. Found footage horror movies require no real stars, not much in terms of special effects, and such films can be made using basic equipment. Accordingly, found footage movies can be



A shot from the found footage monster movie *Cloverfield* (2008). Here, Rob (Michael Stahl-David) and Beth (Odette Yustman), camera at the ready, prepare for another terrifying encounter.

produced cheaply, and if they are made well, the sky is the limit in terms of the film's profit. That is the economic reason such films exist.

But the creative reasons are much more intriguing. As author Alexandra Heller Nicholas writes in *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality*, "these films are exciting to watch not because their events may or may not have happened, but from the formal innuendo that they did occur," and from the fact that they often originate "on the same ubiquitous consumer grade technology that many of us have ourselves (home video cameras, mobile phones, web cams, etc.)"²

In other words, these stories look real, and are shot with tools that the audience recognizes as ones utilized in everyday reality. The use of this equipment brings the experience of terror closer to home. Found footage horror movies thus fully transport viewers to another life. We are there, in the action. And we are in danger, side-by-side with the protagonists. The "amateur" aesthetic, as it has sometimes been called, supports the idea that the film we are watching is not a self-consciously crafted artistic narrative. Rather, it is footage captured by happenstance, in the middle of the crisis. That last bit—footage created by happenstance, in the middle of the crisis—is key to understanding the popularity of this horror film form in the 2000s.

The 9/11 attacks are found footage horror of an all-too real sort. Cable News networks reported the attack on the World Trade Center in real time, and immediately began filming it, but amateur filmmakers, tourists, for instance, also captured footage of the hijacked planes striking buildings. The 9/11 attacks were a horror show captured *in media res*, and the audience had no idea how it would end.

The amateur aesthetic of the found footage horror film is controversial, for certain. Found footage is far more immersive than any third person filmmaking, and its so-called "amateur" look is widely associated with reality. Awkward framing, dropped cameras, cracked lens and other artifacts of "amateurism" become, in found footage horror films, important techniques utilized to reflect a sense of *cinéma vérité*, or truth. As scholar Xavier Aldana Reyes notes, "*found footage horror is cheap to make and the independent and amateurish look of the product appeals to a number of horror film makers. More importantly, the handheld look chimes with the genre's affective drive*," generating a "video-game style first person immersion."³ Again, the popularity of this form in the 2000s goes hand-in-hand with the rise of horror survival games (*Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill*) and first-person shooters (*House of the Dead*, *Doom*).

The immediacy of the found footage format might be accurately described as a true distillation of the horror

film's essence. In generations past, horror films have often featured a Final Girl to root for, for example. She survives the action of rubber reality or slasher films. Since the camera of the found footage type horror film is diegetic, or again, in universe, no survivor is now necessary. There is no need or necessity for an individual to defeat the film's monster or villain, or, even for someone to survive its attack.

The camera is the only necessary survivor, "*a found manuscript that would contain the key to the disappearance of the protagonists*," according to Reyes.⁴ In the more nihilistic, cynical 2000s horror films of this type, the filmmakers omit the artifice of the hero, or the champion. Instead, no one lives. Only a record of the horrific experiences can be counted on to be continued, a warning passed on to the next generation.

The found footage horror film's veil of artifice is the problem. It is actually very difficult for skilled filmmakers to "echo" an amateur aesthetic, and still create intended effects of suspense, or shock. This is why so many bad found footage horror movies have been made. It is not that found footage movies, by necessity lack chops, or solid film technique, it is that the filmmakers of this type must carefully, and professionally achieve their horror effects and goals through the mirroring of immersive amateurism.

Not all critics are willing to explore this distinction and so, to this day, they attack the found footage format as inherently unprofessional or amateur, not as the artistic, deliberate recreation of the unprofessional or amateurish. The great movie critic Roger Ebert, for instance, in his review of the found footage horror anthology *V/H/S* (2012) was not shy about slamming the format, which had become exhausted. "*In this genre*," Ebert opined, "*we are given low-quality home video footage, usually underlit, lacking in pacing and intentionally hard to comprehend. The premise is that the footage was taken before some unspeakable event occurred, was discovered later, and now is the film we're watching.*"⁵

Ebert's comments on the mainstream critic's lack of curiosity and comprehension of the found footage films specifically, and the mission of horror films, in general. The horror film wishes to make the audience feel uneasy, and unsafe during a movie-going experience. If all artifice and third person distancing techniques can be removed from that experience, what is left is something that feels real, and therefore something feels very dangerous. Obviously, not all found-footage horror movies are up to such a challenge, and so do come across as unprofessional. But when this format works, it feels like the mainlining of terror into the audience's veins.

One might think that after the success of *The Blair Witch Project*, the found footage genre would have

immediately proliferated. Such was not the case. After a terrible, early imitator, *The St. Francisville Experiment* (2000), the form fell into obscurity in the early 2000s, likely as a result of the War on Terror and the nation's trauma at the footage that repeated endlessly on CNN, MSNBC and Fox in the days, weeks and months after that chaotic day in September.

In short, to use 2000s slang or lingo, it was just "too soon" for a found footage movie to succeed. But by the mid-2000s, however, the found footage format was back, more confident, accomplished and nuanced than ever before. It was seen in such films as *REC* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), and *Paranormal Activity* (2009), all of which achieved great popularity and kudos from horror fans, general audiences, and even dismissive critics. Even with these newfound footage films occurring in new settings (such as suburbia or Manhattan), a paradigm for the format soon emerged in the 2000s.

This paradigm, like the slasher paradigm of the 1980s, is one that can be applied to virtually every title in the found footage format.

Found Footage Convention One: The Film Crew

In most found footage horror films, the horror begins when a single, specific act is undertaken: *the decision to make a movie (or often, documentary)*. As fans of *The Blair Witch Project* will recall, Heather set out to make a documentary in the town of Blair with two friends, Mike and Josh. This is the act that puts the team's life in danger. This act of creation, or artistry, is mirrored in many of the found footage films of the 2000s.

In *Incident at Loch Ness* (2004), Werner Herzog sets out to make a film about the Loch Ness Monster, only to (maybe?) encounter the real thing. In *REC* (2007), a TV news crew is working on a documentary about nighttime life in a Barcelona fire station, when the terror is unleashed. In *Diary of the Dead* (2008), the zombie apocalypse begins, and it is observed by filmmakers in the process of creating their own low budget horror movie. In *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006), the rise of a new slasher legend is chronicled by a film crew making a documentary about him.

Because of the presence of a film crew, in all such cases, a horrific scenario is fully documented. Importantly, since a film crew is present, there is always a cameraman or woman on hand. That Director of Photography, that cinematographer, is both a character in the action (who might be killed), and our eyes showing the audience the action.

The fallback, when an actual film crew isn't available, is also seen frequently in found footage horror

movies too. The home video photographer, not part of a crew, is that character. In efforts such as *Cloverfield* (2008), *Paranormal Activity* (2007) or *Evil Things* (2009), a lone person, usually living a "normal" suburban life, uses the camera to record special family events, like holidays, a going away party, or even just day-to-day events. These individuals are not actively engaged in an official project, but like their corollaries in the film crew, have picked up the camera and appointed themselves as witnesses to something. They have decided, then, to hit "the record button."

The urge in either case is the same: to create something, whether it is a document for public consumption like a documentary about the Loch Ness Monster, or a document for private consumption (such as home movies).

Found Footage Convention Two: Local Legends and Nature as the Fulcrum of Evil/Terror

Often in found footage horror movies, local legends, long held to be untrue, are the source of the terror. In *The St. Francisville Experiment*, a team goes into a local haunted house, the home of Madame De Laurie in New Orleans. She was reputed to be a sadist and murderer who terrorized her slaves in Antebellum days. *Incident at Loch Ness*, of course, involves Nessie, the monster reputed for generations to have lived in the Scottish lake. *Noroi: The Curse* (2005) involves a demon of folklore called Kagutaba.

Not all Found Footage movies concern the discovery of local legends, but many, especially in the 2010s, do so. In that decade, several movies concern Bigfoot (*Willow Creek* [2014], *Exists* [2014]), specifically.

The question of course, is why tie found footage films to old or local "monster" legends? In a substantive way, horror films are about the return of the repressed, of old terrors that people have never outgrown, only attempted to bury. Here, there is a clear tension between the tools of modern-day life, including iPhones, HD cameras, and the like, and the existence of demons, cryptids, witches, and other avatars of old superstition. This juxtaposition suggests the idea of modern man, with his all his technology, becoming powerless in the face of something ancient, or primal, like the Blair Witch, Nessie, or even Bigfoot.

Accordingly, many of the "monsters" of the found footage format dwell in places associated with nature. They dwell in the forests in *Noroi: The Curse*, and *The Blair Witch Project*. A strange encounter with a ghost occurs on the shore of a distant lake, in *Lake Mungo* (2008). These places are locales where

modern technology, like the cell phone, doesn't always work.

They are also places, often, without large populations, or other aspects of human society, like available law enforcement. The core idea of the found footage format is one of taking modern technology to a place where it doesn't exist or isn't often used. That destination is a place of nature, and mystery, cloaked in impenetrable nights, and blanketed in trees and forests. In these places, cameras search for things forgotten, or buried in the human psyche: the Old Monsters.

Found Footage Convention Three: The Medium Is the Message

More than in any other horror film format, perhaps, the narratives and the visual techniques of the found footage format are joined together as one. The medium is the message. Thus, a variety of techniques are utilized in this format, all of a visual nature, to tie theme to imagery.

In *Cloverfield*, for example, a video camera records the arrival in Manhattan of a giant monster, and the ensuing destruction. As the camera records the action, the film reveals, at times, what is being taped over to record the footage. There are moments between the monster shows, of characters on dates, talking to one another, even attending an amusement park. These "stolen" moments, in danger of being erased forever, build characterization, but also contrast with the monster attack scenes, showing the humanity lost during this invasion.

These scenes are not traditional flashbacks. These are pre-existing moments that come to the forefront as these tapes are found, as this footage is aired. They are brief grace notes between moments of terror, and they could not exist as they do outside this film format.

Another favorite technique in found footage horror films is what this author calls "Let them Eat Static," after a line from Khan in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982). Often in found footage horror efforts when a cut is required between scenes or locations, the camera goes to static momentarily, to bridge the moments. Sometimes it happens during a chase. Sometimes it happens when the camera is turned off, and re-activated. Occasionally, the "let them eat static" moment arrives when a monster attacks, as all Hell breaks loose, and the filmmakers have a little bit of fun with the audience, throwing out static to prevent the audience from seeing clearly the visual details of the assault, or even the assaulter.

Many found footage films also utilize night vision. The night vision filter, which gives individuals an eerie otherworldly glow, also gives them black pools for eyes, making them resemble, at times, demons. The night vision filter has been used in the climactic scene of *REC*,

for example, to show audiences what lurks in total darkness in a creepy apartment. That thing in the darkness cannot be seen with human eyes, so again, there is a connection between technology and evil. The monster in *REC* is born from a demonic source, from a possessed girl, but the terror could not have been weaponized without modern technology. So even though the demon in the attack is an ancient evil, it is one that is seen, literally, through the auspices only of technology.

Found Footage Convention Four: Car Ride Exposition

Given the importance of the road trip gone wrong, or road terror type of horror film in the 2000s, it is not surprising that many found footage films also feature scenes of people traveling in cars to their destination (which, as we have seen above, is usually some rural or isolated location). The car driving scene appears in such films as *Noroi: The Curse*, *Diary of the Dead*, and of course, *The Blair Witch Project*.

The car exposition scene usually occurs in the opening minutes of a found footage film, and involves characters discussing their trip, their production (if they are making a movie), and perhaps even local legends. Again, in a third-person film, in a more formally styled film, there would be a long shot, or montage of a car driving to its destination, and then arriving. The found footage format positions this scene inside the car, with the camera, as the landscape rushes by, outside the vehicle. The time is not wasted, because the characters deliver important information about the nature of what they will soon face. The driving scene in found footage movies is always about exposition, sometimes about building character, and, intrinsically, about crossing the threshold from civilization to the primal terror-land.

Found Footage Convention Five: There Are No Survivors

Perhaps the most important modification of the horror film format in the found footage is the outcome for the protagonists. As noted above, there is no necessity for anyone to live in a found footage horror movie. The tapes survive and are discovered. No human being needs testify to the horrific events, since the camera can do it for them. There still may be a final girl in found footage horror movies; a last surviving female of considerable insight and resourcefulness. But now, she may possess all those commendable abilities and attributes, and still die, leaving only the camera to reveal her struggles to the world.

The fact that many found footage movies end with

no survivors (*The Blair Witch Project*, *REC*—apparently, *Paranormal Activity*, *Cloverfield*) is perhaps the most consequential addition to horror films' evolution in more than a hundred years. It is a grim development, for a grim age, certainly, an age of war, recession, natural disasters, pandemics and the like. In addition to contributing to the nihilistic nature of horror films in the 21st century, the "no survivors" paradigm of the 2000s and 2010s suggests a tacit acknowledgment that our technology outlives us.

We may die, but our Facebook accounts go on. Monsters may kill us, but our YouTube videos still get views. Our actions are recorded for posterity, even if we don't live to see their "viral" spread across the net. It's a simple fact of 21st-century life. It used to be that people had to write a book to be immortal. Now, their videos represent a storehouse for future generations.

We die. Our footage lives on.

The found footage format blazed through a rapid ascent in the latter half of the 2000s and became the most prolific and dominant format of the 2010s. Film such as *Mr. Jones* (2013), *Devil's Pass* (2014), *As Above, So Below* (2014), *Mr. Jones* (2015), *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (2014), *The Visit* (2015), *Final Prayer* (2015), *The Gallows* (2015) and *Creep* (2015) demonstrate how the new, controversial horror format took on ever complex narratives while continuing to deploy the conventions spelled out above.

"Spread it like sickness": J-Horror Remakes (or New Asian Horror)

This category, J-Horror (for Japanese Horror), might be more accurately termed A-Horror, because many films of the 2000s are remakes not just of Japanese films, but Korean ones as well. Uniquely, if one gazes at the J-Horror films, it is clear that globalization has impacted their shape. The Japanese films upon which the J-Horror remakes are based are called "*kaidan*" (meaning ghost story), and they seem to come from a specific film, and a specific tradition in American horror films.

Consider for a moment Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). This film is a

mystery about a group of teens, localized in an American suburban neighborhood, who are stalked and murdered by a vengeful ghost, Freddy Krueger. To understand Freddy, why he kills, and why he chooses the teens as victims, the film's protagonist, Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) must embark on an investigation into the past; one which reveals the crime that her parents (and all the Elm Street parents) committed against Freddy years earlier. Importantly, Freddy's vengeance is not natural, not of the normal world. He can re-shape reality or dreams to his will, and the film is the most popular and remembered example of what Wes Craven termed the "rubber reality" horror genre.

Consciously or unconsciously, the kaidan films mirror the details and concepts of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Films such as *Ringu* (1998) or *Ju-on* (2001) focus on the revenge of an individual who is already dead, and those individuals possess supernatural abilities to reshape the world and terrorize their victims. *Into the Mirror* (2003), the source material for *Mirrors* (2008), and *Chakushin Ari* (2003), the source material for *One Missed Call* (2008), repeat the same format. Importantly, in all such films, there is an investigation by the protagonist which uncovers a crime previously hidden or unknown. The investigation and uncovering of a crime proves key in such J-Horror remakes as *The Eye* (2008), and *Shutter* (2008), as well.

But if rubber reality and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* appear to be part of the DNA gestalt of the "kaidan"



Another major genre of horror movies in the 2000s was the J-Horror (Japanese Horror) or Asian Horror remakes. *The Ring* (2002), starring Naomi Watts and Martin Henderson, was a remake of 1998's *Ringu* and proved a major hit and cultural touchstone in America.

ghost story films in Japan, the format also added many original facets that came to be of great importance in the American remakes. Most importantly, perhaps, the J-Horror films replaced Freddy's dream world with a new portal of point of entry into our world: *technology*.

The VHS tape and VCR in *The Ring*, the camera in *Shutter*, and the cell phones in *One Missed Call* and *Pulse* focus on the idea of evil seeping into modern day life through the very devices that we use in regular, daily life. If Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* suggested that TV was a portal through which evil could enter American life, the Japanese horror films of the turn of the century and their American remakes take that conceit much, much further. Colette Balmain, author of *Introduction to the Japanese Horror Film*, writes that in Japanese culture "concerns around the loss of connection are much more pivotal in a society based upon a long tradition of obligations amongst individuals and communities."⁶

Devices like cell phones should connect people to one another, but do they do that?

Or do they distract people from interacting with one another? And the videotape of *The Ring* series? Is it fair to state that the copying and transmission of the tape by different individuals, forges a connection between people in a world missing such connection? Unfortunately, it is an evil connection!

In America, this idea of technology creating an insidious or malevolent connection proved an ideal fit for the War on Terror Age. This is the Web 2.0 age of social media, and 24-hour news cable stations, as well as the dawn of the iPhone, a device that connects people to one another, around the world, via various platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and the like. The "ghosts" in the Japanese horror films and their American remakes transmit their "horror" into the world at large, and that horror outlives them, often, as individuals.

Their suffering, which is what they wish for the "audience" to recognize, multiplies and grows exponentially, among ever-increasing circles. Both *The Ring* and *The Grudge* are obsessed with the mass transmission of individual or personal suffering and horror. The pain of the few gets broadcast to the many, across generations, across locations, across whole landscapes and countries.

In *The Ring*, Samara uses that "haunted" videotape to broadcast her own personal suffering, to connect with others. She hopes, perhaps, for an empathy she never felt in her life. A viewer watches Samara's tape and one week later, he or she dies. The only way to prevent an untimely end it is make a copy of Samara's and pass the terror on, like a haunted chain letter. Only by increasing Samara's network is the curse alleviated.

Likewise, in *The Grudge*, a house in Tokyo is the nexus of a psychic scar on the world, a wound and hatred



Poster art for the sequel to a Japanese remake, *The Ring Two* (2005).

so powerful that it infects all who step inside. Nobody who enters the house can escape the "curse" centered there. That scar, that curse—that grudge—wants to connect to the living and form a kind of after life in the process.

In *Pulse* (2006), dark, angry spirits seep into people through their cell phones, transforming the living into kind of half-alive shadows of their former selves. This idea seems a commentary on the idea that too much screen time saps the energy, the soul, and instead of fostering connection, only shuts it down. Real connection is not through a screen, or a device, and that kind of contact only opens up the door to ennui, if not possession,

There's a seriousness and darkness to these films, one about old, personal wounds leaking out, or imprinting or impressing themselves on our devices, and in the software and hardware we all utilize in the technological age of the 21st century. The characters in the film may investigate the ghosts, but they rarely escape, or survive their encounters with them. The Japanese horror films of the 2000s, and their American remakes "in general involve a more fatalistic tone and a more pessimistic

approach to an individual's control over their destiny," according to Andy Richards, author of *Asian Horror*.⁷ That is an important point to focus on. Once something malicious is free in the ether, whether on TV, or on the Internet, one can't easily put the genie (or Samara) back in the bottle.

This is a crucial shift in American horror films. Already, the found footage horror films of the 2000s have made human survival unnecessary. No lead character need make it through the ordeal, because the camera records the events, and is handed off to us, the audience, to experience the terror for ourselves. The Japanese horror film remakes of the era likewise sever a link between victim action or behavior, and victim consequence. Since the 1980s at least, American horror films have dealt in the precept that "vice precedes slice and dice." In other words, a character's poor behavior, such as pre marital sex, or recreational drug use results in the character's demise, at the hands of an avenger like Jason Voorhees. But the Japanese remakes offer a new paradigm.

That paradigm is simply, *spectatorship is enough*.

Watching a tape is an act that brings the evil. Listening to a voice mail, makes one a participant in a maleficent calling circle. Walking into a house, unaware of anything about its occupants, drags one into the house's curse. In many J-horror remakes, the victims do literally nothing to deserve their horrible fates other than watch, or listen, or show up. They are accidental tourists, and relatively passive acts, such as spectatorship, bring about their destruction.

Because art does not exist in a vacuum, but rather mirrors real life, one must wonder how this idea came to take a foothold, and carry such power first in Japan, and then, later in the United States. The idea of devices causing connection, but not, perhaps, the right kind of connection, helps to explain Japan's interest in this paradigm. America came to it a little later, after 9/11, and again, that's the key explanation. Some people would suggest, after watching days of 9/11 coverage, and the Iraq Invasion news coverage that CNN, Fox News and MSNBC exist merely to broadcast the suffering of a few to millions, perhaps billions of people.

It isn't true just of war, either. News vans and cameras show up at places like Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora, Sandy Hook, and creates a testament of grief, sorrow, rage, denial and pain. These intense emotions enter through our devices, through TVs, computer laptops, and Internet pages read on a smart phone.

In the early 2000s for example, American audiences saw Saddam Hussein's dead sons on TV as bruised, bullet-ridden corpses. Purple, yellow and brown, these corpses were etched eternally in the nation's memory. Sure, these men were America's enemies. But why

broadcast imagery of their dead bodies, across the world, over and over and over again?

One must wonder how the sight of these and other horrors resonate throughout the American psyche, or even the international psych. By revealing atrocities on a routine basis does the media inure the people to the suffering of human beings? We need not commit the atrocities we see on the cable news stations to be held responsible for them.

Seeing is the crime.

Being there is the crime.

Being a passive percipient is the crime.

Again, go back to Samara in *The Ring*. The act of watching is what makes one an accomplice, and the ghost's target. The act of copying the tape is what frees the viewer. Like the slasher film, or found footage horror film, the J Horror Remakes of the 2000s operate by a particular paradigm or set of conventions that recur.

J-Horror Convention One: Water and Technology

Water is a medium, like technology, that seems to harbor evil, or allow the transmission of evil. There may be a metaphor worth exploring further here. Water is believed to be conducive to contact with spirits in some cultures. Water spills, pools, leaks, and can suffuse an environment, beginning with a tiny drop. Some might say that it is an adequate corollary for our 21st century technology. Although Wi-Fi signals are invisible, they permeate the spaces around us, in a way much like water might. Likewise, invisible signals broadcast by TV networks enter our homes, much like running water. In Japan, water is associated in myth with powerful emotions.

The Ring (2002), and *Dark Water* (2005) both involve water "leaking" into the lives of the protagonists. Rachel (Naomi Watts) in *The Ring* (2002), learns how Samara died in a well, drowned. When Samara returns as a ghost, water pours out of the TV sets from which she emerges, again fostering a connection between water and the signals carried by technology.

In *Dark Water*, Dahlia (Jennifer Connelly) becomes involved with the spirit of young girl who died of neglect. She fell into a rooftop water tower and drowned, like Samara. Now, water suffuses Dahlia's apartment, and she is victim to floods and ubiquitous rain. Although a water tower may not fit the definition of a device, like a cell phone or VCR, it is a product of technology, and modern life. It brings water into our homes for cooking and cleaning. In the ghost's case, the water, like her tears, falls constantly, staining Dahlia's life ever further, until she makes a decision to empathize with the child's tragic experience at the expense of her own life and desires.

The Japanese version of *Pulse*, called *Kairo* (2001), ends with survivors of the ghost attack on a ship at sea, surrounded by water, hopefully protected from technology, this time by the presence of water on all sides.

In all these films, water and technology co-exist, and are perhaps two sides of the same coin. Water is a natural medium, however. Technology is a manmade one

And in that contrast, the horror lies.

J-Horror Convention Two: The Japanese Floaty Girls

Many of the J-Horror American remakes focus on a female, black-haired ghost, or supernatural force. In Japan this ghost is called an “onryou,” and in these films, the appearance of the onryou is strikingly similar: a *girl or woman with black hair*. Black haired female specters appear in *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, *Dark Water*, *Shutter*, and in *The Eye*, to name just a few titles from this cycle. In the meta/post-modern horror film *Cabin in the Woods* (2012), this convention actually gets a name: The Japanese Floaty Girl. These characters are now, officially, a category in horror film tropes!

The Japanese Water or Floaty Girls are typically, females who were wronged in life, or who suffered terribly in life. Their pain is such that, in the next world, in the spirit world, they return (like Freddy Krueger) to make certain that their anguish has been heard and understood. It is notable that all of these monsters are female, and that many correspond to ideals of beauty and eroticism in Japan. That seems to be the key juxtaposition, beauty and terror in one package. The question might come up about whether this is misogynistic in some sense.

However, one must remember that the Japanese Floaty Girls are not evil by nature, like their spiritual ancestor, Freddy Krueger. Freddy was a child molester and born the “*bastard son of a hundred maniacs*,” meaning he was evil to his core. By pointed contrast, the Japanese Water Girls in some fashion or another have all suffered terrible wrongs or been the victims of terrible crimes. Their campaigns of vengeance result from the wrongs they were handed in life, not an evil nature, or evil upbringing.

The ghost in *Dark Water* suffered neglect and died alone. The family in *The Grudge* was the victim of male domestic abuse. Samara in *The Ring* was never legitimately a part of the family that adopted her and was treated like an outsider. Megumi in *Shutter* (2008) was victimized by a group of men, and committed suicide following rape. Ana Cristina Martinez in *The Eye* (2008), is not Asian, yet she too fits into this category. She hanged

herself after being unable to contend with premonitions that were haunting her, and then she became the haunter, herself.

J-Horror Convention Three: The Investigator, the Procedural, and the Absence of Answers

Many of the J-Horror films involve an investigation by the media, the police or other symbol of authority, into the crimes that gave rise to the Japanese Floaty Girl’s reign of terror. In *The Ring*, Rachel works for a metropolitan newspaper, and learns of Samara’s story through the urban legend of the video tape that kills the watcher.

In *The Grudge*, Detective Nakagawa attempts to end the curse after three colleagues have succumbed to it. Detective Jack Andrews (Edward Burns) is the investigator in *One Missed Call*. And Ben Carson (Kiefer Sutherland), a suspended police detective, is the investigator in *Mirrors*.

In a typical procedural film, the investigator unravels the mystery. He or she solves it, and whatever crisis exists is resolved because of the investigator’s efforts. This is not the case, however, in the J-Horror remakes. Rachel believes she solves Samara’s crisis, only to find out Samara will not be sated. All Rachel can settle for is copying Samara’s tape and saving the life of her son, Aidan. The horror continues to transmit.

In *The Grudge*, Nakagawa attempts to destroy the house, the hub of the curse, with gasoline. He dies before putting a stop to it.

Likewise, Carson in *Mirrors* seemingly defeats the evil, only to find himself trapped in a mirror universe, at film’s end

And, in *One Missed Call*, the evil is finally defeated, only to be reborn.

In all these cases, the investigator and the investigation fail to yield real results. The Japanese Water Girls and their ilk continue, unabated on their campaigns. Conventional authority cannot stop the psychic cries for help, or vengeance. The authority of this world cannot stop the pain from the Other world. Pain is not easily “sated” by existing structures of law enforcement. Justice therefore becomes, in these films, something *cosmic*, and in a very real sense, outside the hands of human beings.

The J-Horror (or Asian Horror) remakes feature a tremendous unity of characters, ideas and themes, and while that quality is admirable, it may also be the reason why the format burned itself out by the end of the decade. After watching two or three of these efforts, the sameness becomes oppressive. A case for greatness can be made for *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, *Dark Water*, and *Pulse*, in any court of law, but the format quickly becomes repetitive.

The Ring Two and other sequels, such as *The Grudge 2*, and *The Grudge 3*, failed to grow the trend in a meaningful way, or in a new, evolved direction.

But the death knell for this format occurred in 2008 with a crop of films that utterly failed to spark the imagination of the public: *The Eye*, *Mirrors*, *One Missed Call*, and *Shutter*. Late in the decade, with so much (Japanese) water under the bridge, many of these cinematic tales seemed overtly familiar, or half-baked, and audiences turned their backs on them without regret.

What Lies Beneath: The “Men Behaving Badly” Films of the 2000s (Or #MeToo)

In autumn of 2017, a social movement for justice called #MeToo swept the United States. This movement was dedicated towards victims, mostly women but also sometimes men, speaking out about the abuse and harassment they had endured in the workplace, and the men in power who had committed the abuse and harassing. The words “Me Too” show solidarity for other victims and reveal the breadth and depth of this problem in American society. The choice of words themselves go back to Tarana Burke, an African American activist, who first used them in 2006, more than a decade earlier.⁸

Many of the men who were accused in the 2010s of repeated, terrible, and abusive behaviors were, in fact, ensconced high in the entertainment industry. They have names like Bill Cosby, James Franco, Matt Lauer, Les Moonves, and Donald Trump. Two individuals accused of this behavior, director Bryan Singer, and power-house Miramax executive producer Harvey Weinstein, have had, over the years, a close association with horror movies.

Going at least as back to the 1940s and cinematic efforts such as *Gaslight* (1944), horror movies and thrillers have taken on the idea of powerful men using their status and privilege to victimize others; again, mostly

women. In literature, this idea goes back much further. The gothic format itself has been termed, by author Paula Quigley, “a vocabulary with which to articulate women’s experiences,” including harassment, abuse and rape.⁹

A virtue of good horror movies is they often hold up a mirror to the society that produces them; revealing facets of that society before the culture even reckons with it. The first decade of the 20th century reveals this pro-social function with a sub-genre of films that involve, specifically, men in authority who behave badly towards



Although #MeToo may have gotten its name in the 2010s (circa 2017), horror movies were ahead of the game. The aughts featured number of films about gaslighting white men in power who betrayed the women in their lives. One such film was *What Lies Beneath* (2000). Top: Claire Spencer (Michelle Pfeiffer) and her husband Norman (Harrison Ford) peer out at the window at suspicious-seeming neighbors. Bottom: director Robert Zemeckis puts Pfeiffer and Ford through their paces.

women, and, in most cases, receiving cosmic justice for their misdeeds.

There are important aspects of this sub-genre to consider. The first is, as noted above, that the abusive men in these films are typically “safe” from human justice by dint of their gender, skin color, societal esteem or profession. Harrison Ford plays a college professor and admired researcher in Robert Zemeckis’s supernatural film, *What Lies Beneath* (2000). His character also happens to be a champion gaslighter of his wife, played by Michelle Pfeiffer. And, as the film reveals, he has also murdered a young student with whom he was having an affair and covered up the crime. He lies to his wife about it, but the ghost of his victim returns, both to punish him, and to “wake” his wife, Claire.

In *Gothika* (2003), Charles Dutton plays a well-regarded psychologist who actually abducts women and tortures them in a sex dungeon. His wife, played by Halle Berry, knows nothing of this secret life until led, essentially by a ghost, to the truth.

In *An American Haunting* (2006), Donald Sutherland plays a man in Colonial America who believes he has been cursed by a witch, a woman, naturally, but there is some cause to believe that he has actually been cursed by his own guilt for the way he has treated her, and for his own inappropriate conduct towards his daughter.

The list goes on and on.

Hard Candy (2005) involves a pedophile who “hides” in plain sight. He is a respectable photographer who masquerades as an ally of women and verbalizes support for good “liberal” causes such as environmentalism. Meanwhile, he invites underage girls—children—back to his home, where he has sex with them.

Both versions of *Shutter*, in 2004 and 2008, also involve a young professional man who is part of the establishment, a photographer as well, who hides a dark secret regarding his treatment of women. He allowed his buddies to rape his ex-girlfriend, and instead of helping her, he recorded the crime.

Deadgirl (2008) finds a group of jocks or athletes abusing a “fuck slave,” a zombie, basically, and making plans to turn one of their female classmates into another one, the next step, perhaps, in the teen culture horror movies popular in the 1990s (*The Rage: Carrie 2*, *Stir of Echoes*, etc.)

Even the admittedly exploitive *Sick Nurses* (2008) contends with the bad behavior by men in authority. In this case, that man is an esteemed physician who is the “doctor of the year,” manipulating women to hurt other women.

The most fascinating aspect of this dozen or so “Men Behaving Badly” horror films is the mechanism for revenge against these men. There is an unconscious

awareness, perhaps, in these films that legal authorities again, often controlled by white men—will not address, correct or prosecute these very real, very harmful acts.

Accordingly, the supernatural must step in.

The supernatural mechanism doesn’t obey or adhere to human authority, or systemic rules of entitlement and privilege. The ghosts of the women wronged in *What Lies Beneath*, *Gothika*, *Shutter*, and *Sick Nurses* are the ones who cry out for justice, mete justice, and make the men pay for their behavior. Importantly, however, these women are already “dead.” They were wronged in life but got no satisfaction in life. Their only avenue for justice is to reach out from beyond the grave, after they have been destroyed, to call out and punish their abusers.

This is actually a perfect metaphor for the #MeToo movement, because the victimized women (and again, some victimized men) often lose jobs, or even entire careers over the abuse they suffered. They suffer mental and physical trauma because of the unwanted harassment and abuse. They become “ghosts,” after a fashion, in their own lives, in this mortal coil. Their only way to fight back in a system that perpetually fails to hear them is to call out their abusers, now on social media, or often in lawsuits. But in a very real sense, the abusers made them ghosts, people who have not been heard or acknowledged; people who cannot continue their life or career because of a conspiracy of silence, or because they have been deemed “difficult” for not playing the game according to the rules established by powerful and untrustworthy men in the entertainment industry, for example.

In films like *An American Haunting*, the victims of male privilege have no recourse but to “haunt” those who have wronged them, in a kind of vengeful afterlife. But the inference is plain. The women are wronged, don’t get heard, or don’t receive justice in the mortal coil. If they want their voice listened to, or justice to be meted, the result may be a kind of cursed half-life, one that still doesn’t give them success, peace of mind, or even closure, in this world.

Not all films of this decade were as socially conscious, of course. An absolutely dreadful interloper film, *Swimfan* (2002), for example, concerns an entitled, white teenage athlete, a swimmer, who cheats on his girlfriend and has sex with another young woman. Instead of asking the audience to consider the idea that this young man should face the consequence of his actions, the film is structured to build sympathy for the male athlete, since he could lose his academic future over his misdeeds. The interloper he contends with, a young woman, is a psycho and dangerous. Blame and responsibility are landed on her shoulders, instead of the young man’s.

It’s a perfect case of Brock-Turner-ism.

It is fascinating that so many of these “men behaving badly” films were produced between 2000 and 2009, mostly by mainstream Hollywood where this problem of abuse is so ubiquitous. This is evidence, perhaps, that horror, even in a time of big budgets, and A list “stars,” respond to what’s in the water, culturally-speaking, before many of us are aware of what lurks there, beneath the surface. The culture’s awakening to “Men Behaving Badly” arrived, formally, in 2017, with the viral campaign of #MeToo, yet the horror film genre had been making this case as plain as day, more than a decade earlier, revealing “*what lies beneath*,” to co-opt a term.

“To Me, Hollywood Is About Death”: The Neo Slashers

It is no exaggeration to state that Wes Craven and Kevin Williamson’s *Scream* (1996) saved the horror film format in the mid-1990s. The success of that film created a miniboom of new, self-aware, or “meta” slasher films like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1998), and *Urban Legends* (1998). The glory of this format is two fold.

First, the neo-slashers resurrect the Slasher Paradigm of the 1980s, evoking nostalgia in the audience. Secondly, however, these slasher films feature movie-savvy, irony-coated characters who comment on aspects of that paradigm. The neo slashers are entertaining, fast moving, smart movies that are self-reflexive, and summon the memory of a previous decade.

As the 2000s began, the neo slashers were still going strong. *Scream 3* (2000), *Cherry Falls* (2000) and *Urban Legends: Final Cut* (2000) all premiered at the start of the decade, and attempted to extend the format’s winning streak, again juxtaposing the slasher paradigm with self-aware, sharp-witted protagonists (and screenwriters).

But, as is the case with all movie fads, or trends, the neo slashers began to tire out. *Scream 3* is no disaster, but suffers from a case of familiarity, and a return to the well too many times in four short years. Another neo-slasher film that should have been good, *Valentine* (2001), failed too because it seemed like nothing new, or particularly interesting.

Then, of course, came the 9/11 terror attacks on NYC and VA. Almost immediately, several pundits, including the editor of *Vanity Fair*, Graydon Carter, and *Time Magazine* columnist Roger Rosenblatt, declared what they believed was the end “*of the age of irony*.”

After the terrorist attacks which killed more than three thousand Americans, everything felt so bloody real. A nation that had experienced peace and prosperity

for a long epoch was suddenly forced to contend with tragedy on a scale not seen since the Vietnam War.

In this brave new world, sassy teenagers reciting and overcoming movie clichés while fighting a costumed Ghost Face, felt, perhaps, off the mark. The neo slasher format was perfect for a time of partying, economic expansion and the rise of the Internet, which fostered connections among movie fans, but woefully inadequate to address the bad times following several terrorist attacks, including not just 9/11, but the forgotten Anthrax attacks, and the Beltway sniper attacks. Americans felt under siege during this time, and there were plenty of terrible things to be afraid of.

The neo slashers, as a result, largely went away.

This notation is not meant to suggest that all slasher films disappeared, only that the neo format—the juxtaposition of humor and scares—largely did so. Remakes of *April Fool’s Day* (2008), *Prom Night* (2008), *My Bloody Valentine* (2009) and *Friday the 13th* (2009) all suggested that the slasher format still had life left in it, but for the most part these remakes were played straight, without the self-awareness or “irony” that *Scream* and its 1990s brethren had popularized.

The axiom “bad times make for good horror movies” comes up again, here. The horror form, which had been playing it light and breezy yet cerebral through the *Scream* saga, it turns out, had much bigger fish to fry after 9/11. The horror film woke up to the world around America, and horror began to take on a deeper, darker palette. The first *Urban Legends* film that came after 9/11, for example, reflected the shift in horror movie focus in the 2000s. *Urban Legends: Bloody Mary* (2005) was not a slasher film like its predecessors, rather it was a supernatural ghost story. This shift in genre is an acknowledgment that in the War on Terror Age, the neo-slasher format looked like an artifact from another age,

“Your job is to craft my doom”: Serial Killer Cinema

The serial killer was the most-oft seen boogeyman of the 1990s. Set in the milieu of the police procedural, serial killer movies featured a realistic monster, and a protagonist to stop him, the investigator. The tools to stop that monster were behavioral science, and in some cases, DNA.

The 1990s serial killer movies were numerous, and repetitive, especially since the leitmotif of so many serial killer films were the under the surface connections between cop and monster. The most popular and remembered serial killer of the 1990s was Hannibal Lecter, a character who returned in three films in the aughts. The

first, *Hannibal* (2001), was Ridley Scott's operatic sequel to *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), while the next two installments, *Red Dragon* (2002) and *Hannibal Rising* (2007), were prequels.

With so many serial killers having stalked the Clinton Era, the 2000s films went to great lengths to distinguish themselves, to revamp the form in new ways. The aforementioned *Hannibal* eschewed the police procedural, for the most part, and instead involved not Clarice hunting down Hannibal (Anthony Hopkins), but Hannibal "protecting" Clarice from corruption in the FBI. The film became notorious for a scene in which Hannibal fed an agent's (Ray Liotta) own, cooked brain to him.

Another film, *The Cell* (2000), introduced fantasy elements into the serial killer cinema. In this film directed by Tarsem Singh, a psychologist played by Jennifer Lopez could travel into the nightmare universe of a serial killer's

mind using a new technology. That dreamscape was an imaginative, terrifying one, dominated by bizarre and memorable imagery. The serial killer, played by Vincent D'Onofrio, fancied himself a God/demon like creature, and trapped the counselor in his own Alice in Wonderland like world. In this world, the killer's exaggerated sense of his own power was visualized, as was his misogyny.

The *Saw* movies, while also qualifying as torture-porn, represent another innovative form of serial killer film. In the six *Saw* films featured during this decade, the serial killer didn't actually do the killing. Instead, the Jigsaw Murderer simply set traps, and the victims would, for all intents and purposes, kill—or save—themselves. The police procedural format was left intact, but the *Saw* movies reshaped the genre to focus not on hunting the killer, but byzantine traps and "games" of monstrous dimensions. These games had names like "the reverse bear trap" and "the venus flytrap."

American Psycho (2000), meanwhile, corkscrewed the format again by making the serial killer the film's protagonist. And, to further complicate matters, Patrick Bateman's (Christian Bale) murder spree might have been all in his deranged head, a product of the dog-eat-dog world of Wall Street in the 1980s.

Other serial killer efforts in the decade include the dead-on-arrival *The Watcher* (2000), which starred Keanu Reeves as a very low-energy serial killer, and *The Alphabet Killer* (2008), which focused on the investigator (Eliza Dushku), and her mental collapse from ongoing attempts to catch an elusive murderer.

"You can't go home": Remakes

The remake or reboot was one of the most commonly-seen movie formats of the 2000s. J-Horror is different, at least in for terms of classification in this book. J-Horror films are remakes of contemporary Japanese horror films. But remakes of classic American horror films, ones some times many decades old, were an even bigger trend the first decade of the 21st century. Author Christian Knoppler provides a good definition of the term "remake," and one that is useful to an understanding of them:

The term does not mark a genre of films defined by common themes or formal factors, but more accurately describes a practice of reproduction. A remake, in short, is a new version of an existing film, a repeat production. Upon closer investigation though, the boundaries of what constitutes a "new version" becomes blurred, and the remake may overlap with other reproductive films like the adaption, or the sequel. Depending on one's concept of intertextuality, of course, all texts reproduce earlier texts, and the remake only stands out in its declared focus on a single source.¹⁰



The serial killer had been the most popular silver screen monster of the 1990s, but by the 2000s it was considered old hat. New slasher films such as *The Cell* (2000) offered a fresh twist on the overused monster. Here, a demonic looking Vincent D'Onofrio menaces Jennifer Lopez in a scene that takes place inside the dreams of a diabolical serial killer.

The remakes in the 2000s aren't merely remakes then, but also prequels, for example, such as *The Exorcist: The Beginning* (2005), or *Red Dragon* (2002). These films recreate the atmosphere and structure of earlier, classic films, yet convey a narrative earlier "in universe" than the stories audiences have long been familiar with.

With this definition in mind, one must consider the robust remake catalog in the post 9/11 era. In the ten-year span between 2000 and 2009, more than twenty remakes of popular American horror films were made, but the trend really began in earnest in 2003 with the success of the remake of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974)

Often, long-time horror fans argue about which decade is the best, or the most important in American film history. The two competitors for supremacy are the 1970s and the 1980s. The remakes of the 2000s seem to answer that question rather definitively. Fourteen films of the 1970s were remade, including *Willard* (2003), *The*

Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003), *Dawn of the Dead* (2003), *The Toolbox Murders* (2004), *The Amityville Horror* (2005), *Black Christmas* (2006), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *The Omen 6 6 6* (2006), *When a Stranger Calls* (2006), *The Wicker Man* (2006), *Rob Zombie's Halloween* (2007), *It's Alive* (2009), *The Last House on the Last* (2009) and *Long Weekend* (2009).

By comparison, there were a respectable eight horror films from the 1980s remade in the decade. These titles were *The Fog* (2005), *The Hitcher* (2007), *April Fool's Day* (2008), *Day of the Dead* (2008), *Prom Night* (2008), *Friday the 13th* (2009), *My Bloody Valentine 3D* (2009), and *Halloween II* (2009).

Other remakes came from 1950s movies (*House of Wax* [2005]), and 1960s productions (*Thir13en Ghosts* [2001]).

Remakes of films from any decade, however, are controversial. Horror movie fans typically don't like to see classic, beloved works re-jiggered by a new generation of filmmakers, in 21st-century Hollywood. Consider the list of remakes from the 1970s. These titles are "re imaginations" of classic efforts from John Carpenter, Wes Craven, and Tobe Hooper, the maestros, made by talents who don't typically boast the same acclaim, or affection. In fact, many directors of remakes are first-time feature directors.

Similarly, Hollywood in the 2000s is not necessarily the place for sub-text and deeper meaning. Indeed, such material is actually frowned upon. Because movies of this span must achieve success on their opening weekends, this fact often results in the remakes watering down or omitting key aspects of the original.

Case in point: the remake *The Last House on the Left* does not include the scene from the original Craven film of a suburban Mom and wife biting off an assailant's penis.

Ask any horror fan about that.

As gruesome as the moment is in the 1972 original, it is a trademark of the film's sex-based brutality. To lose it is to suggest that the remake is somehow "less than" the original in terms of boldness; in terms of shock and awe.

Remakes are controversial for reasons beyond the frequent lack of subtext and the absence of the



Views of a remake: *Thir13en Ghosts* (2001), based on William Castle's 1960 opus *13 Ghosts*. Top: Rafkin (Matthew Lillard) sees dead people, thanks to his special ghost-vision glasses. Bottom: Kathy (Shannon Elizabeth, right) encounters the Suicide Woman (not credited, left).



Selma Blair is DJ Stevie Wayne in the 2005 remake of John Carpenter's *The Fog*.

maestros. Typically, the remakes of this era (again, consider prequels to fall under this rubric as well), add much psychological motivation and “reasons” for the horror. For example, Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* retcons Michael Myers as the disturbed outgrowth of a childhood spent in an abusive, white trash, over sexualized home. It is not necessarily that this idea is invalid, or wrong. It is up to every filmmaker to tell the best story that they can, after all. Rather, the “child abuse” narrative of Zombie’s *Halloween* means that Michael loses the “Shape” quality of his character. He is no longer an implacable boogeyman that becomes the receptacle for various and sundry audience fears. Now he is the avatar of a very specific and recognizable background: the cycle of abuse.

This retcon makes Michael’s terror familiar, instead of ambiguous. This author believes (controversially) that the Zombie *Halloween* films are worthwhile, and indeed, genius in some very powerful ways. But they are, also, far afield of what Carpenter wrought, and over-explanatory in terms of Michael’s background.

Often, it is necessary to point out to those who deride remakes out-of-hand that it was actually the well-established and aging horror franchises that created the necessity for them. The *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween* series had witnessed years of inferior sequels or continuations. As author James Kendrick writes in his essay “The

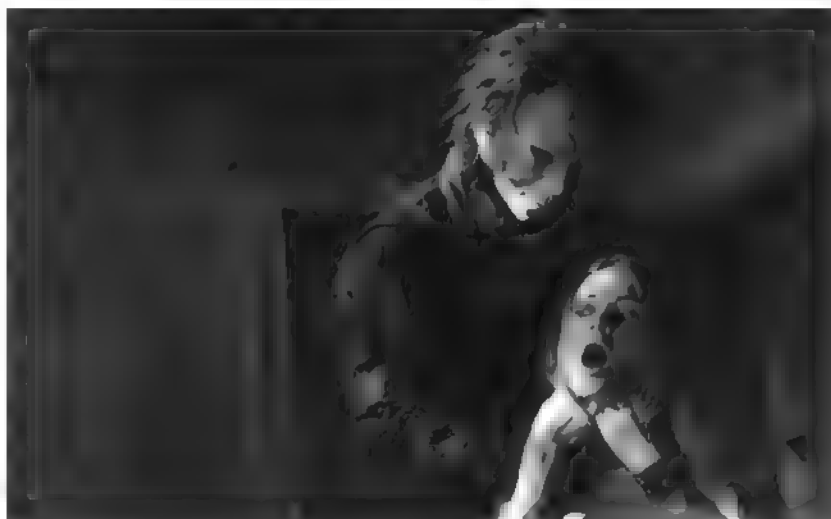
Terrible, Horrible Desire to Know: Post 9/11 Horror Remakes, Reboots, Sequels and Prequels: “the commercial logic behind the creation was predicated largely on the fact that the original series had exhausted themselves through seeds of diminishing critical and commercial impact, hence the need to ‘begin anew.’”¹¹

Indeed, when one looks at a deeply flawed franchise sequel such as *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), it becomes very difficult to argue that Rob Zombie’s creative, non-conventional remake is somehow an inferior product or a betrayal. It is different than what had come before, true, but also, importantly, revitalized. When one considers other deeply inferior sequels such as *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (1993), or *Freddy’s Dead: The Final*

Nightmare (1991), the advantages of remakes and a “fresh start” become more apparent.

Audiences wanted more of the neo classic monsters such as Michael, Freddy or Jason, but simply weren’t getting their money’s worth out of the hit-or-miss, shaggy dog sequels, some of which were in their fourth decade at this time. How many times can Michael Myers “come home” to Haddonfield without rethinking his campaigns, or even, simply, the nature of the home he returns to?

Love or hate Rob Zombie’s approach to the classic material, he at least gave serious, intriguing thought to such questions.



Rob Zombie rebooted John Carpenter’s *Halloween* in 2007. Here, Michael Myers (Tyler Mane) strangles Lynda (Kristina Kleb).

Similarly, one can't intellectually disparage remakes simply because they repeat old formats and narratives. Those are not grounds for a solid argument. Is the 1978 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* to be dismissed, simply because it repeats the characters and ideas of the 1956 original? In short, repetition of beloved narrations and themes have long been a galvanizing and credible reason for the existence of art. As Scott A. Lukas and John Marmysz write in their text *Horror, Science Fiction, and Fantasy Films Remade*:

"...all film, like ritual, plays on the value of repetition, either to make dramatic points or to create suspense in the audience. Film remakes heighten repetition by moving from mere illusion and brief action to credited or uncredited remaking of the entire filmic text. This remaking of film allows for not only an affirmation of control and mastery ... but the forging of cultural familiarity with society itself. When people repeatedly experience the same stories, albeit in new ways and with new actors and new technology, a psychological connection to a new shared world is formalized."¹²

According to these authors, remakes "institutionalize familiarity," and play on feelings of nostalgia for beloved works of art. The tension occurs, however, because the feelings of nostalgia evoked by films like *Halloween*, the original *Friday the 13th* and the like, are not ones that fans want messed with. The quest to "activate" nostalgia is a difficult one, because so much is involved. Nostalgia for a movie such as *Halloween* is about more than the film; it's about the context that shaped the film. And we don't live in that context anymore. We live in a different world, and the appeal to nostalgia actually heightens, in some way, the differences between the past and the present.

The remake came about for very specific reasons, given the context of the 2000s. Specifically, the horror film was once again at a crossroads. The 1990s saw the rise of *The X-Files* (1993–2002), which served up the equivalent of mini-horror movies every week. Old formats, such as rubber reality seemed to be dying out. A glut of serial killer horror movies flattened the genre, and made it seem old, and worn out. How many times could audiences sit through a police procedural about a serial killer and the cop hunting him, playing a "deadly game of cat and mouse." By the year 2000, even the neo slasher format, which began with *Scream* (1996) in the late nineties was beginning to tire out. As Kevin Heffernan writes in his article "Risen from the Vault: Recent Horror Film Remakes and the American Film Identity":

The horror remake cycle ... may be seen as a response to both the waning of the teen slasher film cycle and to the more allusive family based psychological horrors of *The Sixth Sense*. Far from signaling a mannered or moribund

phase of the genre, these horror remakes display tremendous suppleness and ingenuity in their deployment of motifs from both the original movies and contemporary horror films.¹³

So, in theory, horror remakes are lucrative, and represent an attempt to revive the genre. They serve as an homage (or call to nostalgia) for beloved films of years past too, and institutionalize the famous titles, such as *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th* as multi-generational touchstones or myths of America. Yet they are widely hated by horror aficionados. Every announcement of a new horror remake is greeted with complaints and agony. Clearly, there is a disconnect between remakes and their core audience.

Appreciating remakes, as both a critic and a horror fan, requires some mental gymnastics, and that may be the answer to this paradox. If a remake differs in philosophy, approach, and visualization from its source material, the viewer wisely asks, why remake?

If everything about the original is just altered completely, then why remake the original, except to exploit a well known "brand" name?

And, not coincidentally, the exploitation of a brand name became the key marketing approach to many Hollywood films in the 2000s. One way to make money fast is to offer product with a built-in familiarity. Too much familiarity, however, is not good. The audience that doesn't want an experience again like *Halloween: Resurrection* nonetheless may be tempted by that call to start "anew" with a remake simply titled *Halloween*.

But remakes are damned if they do, and damned if they don't.

What if the remake slavishly apes the original film, so much so that, again, the audience asks why remake it? Why remake *Psycho* (1960) shot for shot in 1998? Why remake *Funny Games* the same way? Again, this approach suggests to fans and critics that the decision to remake is purely commercial. Take an old script, reshoot it with more money and more famous actors, and a minimum of creativity or artistry is required.

This is the remake syndrome.

A remake can't be too different from its source material. And it can't be too similar to its source material. What middle ground does that leave for remakes, in which to succeed? How is that needle to be thread?

Based on the remakes that are highly regarded from the 2000s, the answer is simple, and it goes back to historical context. Most of the films remade in this decade came from the 1970s, as noted above. Those films were not just horror efforts, but brilliantly conceived social commentaries on consumerism (*Dawn of the Dead*), violence in American society (*The Last House on the Left*), the battle between the haves and the have nots (*The Hills*

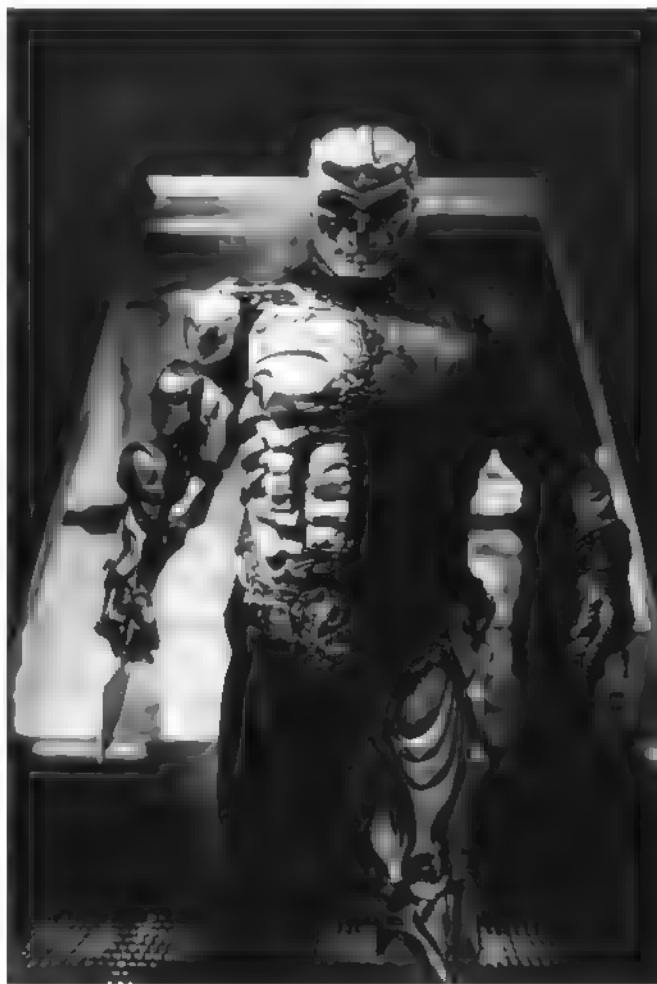
Have Eyes), reproductive rights (*It's Alive*), and comparative religion (*The Wicker Man*). All those seventies films are about something more than scaring audiences. They scare audiences because they intelligently and artistically reflect the issues roiling their cultures at the time of the disco decade

The successful remakes of the 2000s take the “bones” of their source material but find 21st-century contexts that can fit those narratives. The 2006 version of *The Hills Have Eyes* is still about the haves and have nots, but it is also about the raging battle during the War on Terror Age, between Blue State Americans and Red State Americans. It's not just the monsters (standing in for the terrorists, perhaps) who threaten survival, but the division among the “family” (representing American political affiliations). Similarly, the cannibals in this version of *The Hills Have Eyes* are victims of the American government's policies, and their revenge is blowback against their policies, again reflecting Al Qaeda and the War on Terror. A new, 21st-century social commentary has been layered onto the original film's frame or skeleton, and it works surprisingly well.

The same is true for other remakes in this era. Rob Zombie's *Halloween* features roughly the same narrative structure as Carpenter's original but spins it in a new direction that reveals a 21st-century understanding of child abuse, and, perhaps more trenchantly, the cycle of violence. It is true, this Michael Myers is not the abstract “Shape.” Instead, he is a boy who is abused in his poverty-stricken home, confused by the culture's over-sexualization of his mother, and who, after committing a crime, is cast into a heartless, cold system of incarceration that doesn't help, but actually makes him more anti-social.

Again, this is not your father or mother's *Halloween*, for certain. However, Zombie has not replaced something (the Boogeyman idea) with nothing. Instead, he has injected the series with new life, and new context that resonates in the 21st century.

The truly bad remakes of the 2000s, this author proposes, are those that re-do old films consisting of social commentary about their era, with, simply, nothing. This is how remakes fail. They superficially tell the same story as the original, but without all the cerebral intelligence behind the original. These films are truly like Cliff-Notes versions of the source. The 2005 remake of the original *The Amityville Horror* (1979) fails to replace the original film's subtext about home ownership with anything of comparative value or interest and feels empty and superficial by comparison. The 2005 remake of *The Fog* eschews the social commentary about greed and avarice at the start of the Reagan Era with no social commentary whatsoever, and thus feels like a shell of a movie. The 2007 *The Hitcher* does a gender swap in terms of protagonist, and



Old monsters got remade, re-imagined and rebooted for the 21st century. Jason Voorhees (Kane Hodder) got an upgrade to cyborg in *Jason X* (2002), a *Friday the 13th* movie set in outer space.

loses the original's, sub-textual homoeroticism. Again, the remake can't help but feel like a very surface, unsophisticated text by comparison.

When remakes fail in the 2000s, this is the reason why.

Updated special effects, filming techniques, and new actors can't substitute for creative thought, or artistic connection to the material. The old versions of these films are rollercoasters, experiential stories, but ones that leave the audience thinking about how the films relate to their lives, their culture, and their world. The remakes are, by comparison, mere rollercoasters. Here, the obvious issue is that one should not remake a film if the result is a new text that carries less psychic heft, and less relevance to people beyond its simple narrative.

Navigating the Remake Syndrome is not easy. But, on the other hand, it is sad that so many horror fans write off films at the mere word “remake.” The way to approach these efforts is to take each on a case by case basis. And

asking, of each film: *does it speak to its time as clearly, artistically and relevantly as the original spoke to its time?*

If the answer is affirmative, the remake is probably winner.

If the answer is negative, you may be watching a shallow cash-grab.

But a one-size fits all approach to navigating remakes doesn't make any sense, and doesn't illuminate the films as works of art.

Going My Way? The Road Trip Gone Wrong Horror Film

One of the most common horror sub-genres of the 2000s is the so-called "road trip gone wrong," or the road trip gone awry. In narratives of this type, unwitting travelers—usually an uneven numbered group of young people (three or five)—take a detour into terror that they could never have predicted encountering at the start of the day.

To be clear, these films are not unique or new to the aughts.

Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1973) and Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) are two of the most notable examples of the format, and classics at that. The format was revived—and examples of it multiplied in the aughts—because of one galvanizing event in the decade, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Those attacks are mirrored in the road trip gone wrong format. Americans commuted to work on that normal day, only to take an unexpected detour into unimaginable horror. Their fate was not known to them when they sat down in their cars and traveled to Manhattan, or when they boarded trains to travel to their corporate offices.

The road trip gone awry horror movies concern the sheer unacceptability of a day that goes badly; how the detour perverts and overturns expectations and changes everything. It reminds the viewer that the world

they accept as reality—a world of safety, security, modern technology and moral norms—is not reality at all.

The road trip gone wrong films of the 2000s follow a very specific format. The uneven number of travelers creates an odd man or woman out, a third wheel, or fifth wheel dynamic. This means that there may be a romantic triangle featured among the protagonists (as in *Wolf Creek* [2005]). That is the obsessive focus of the characters, as they focus on matters ultimately unimportant in the face of their soon-to-be-threatened mortality.

The characters on a trip then, almost universally, make a final stop on their journey at a borderland between civilization and terror, the last wrong turn or stop before the trespass into the savage world or savage universe. In the majority of road trip horror films, that place, that crossroads, is "The Last Chance Gas Station." It is the final outpost of humanity and modern civilization before the descent into savagery. Often, the Last Chance Gas Station is manned or populated by denizens of the underworld, the horror world. They guard the borderlands. The Last Chance Gas Station is an important stop in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Wrong Turn* (2003), *Dead End* (2004), *Wolf Creek* (2005), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), *Vacancy* (2007), and other examples of the format.

Once the travelers have crossed the borderland and Last Chance Gas Station into the realm of terror, the "commuters" of the road trip gone wrong encounter a new realm where, for the most part, cell phones



In the road trip gone wrong remake, *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), Brenda Carter (Emilie de Ravin) goes on the attack.

don't function. A key element of this narrative type is the theme that modern technology cannot help the protagonists survive or escape, just as modern technology did not help the victims of the 9/11 attacks. The safety and security provided by civilization, by technology, is an illusion in such stories, one that is shattered.

In fact, once positioned in the dark world, the protagonists often stumble upon an archaeological repository, artifacts of previous survivors and of the civilized world. All these previous victims leave behind is their technology: ruined cars, stolen cell phones, and even video cameras that have been stolen by their assailants. This is the "Lost and Found" or belongings room, where the savage inhabitants of this world cast-off the useless and valueless trappings of modern society. If a road-trip gone awry film is set during the 1970s in these aughts films or remakes, older items of the civilized society, such as plastic drivers' licenses, may be found in the Belongings or Lost and Found Rooms.

This trope, the Lost and Found Room, occurs in such films as *Wrong Turn* (2003), *House of Wax* (2005) and *Wolf Creek* (2005), to name just a few.

Another aspect of the post-9/11 milieu involves the assailants themselves, the inhabitants of the dark mirror world, in the place the travelers have crossed over to. An aspect of xenophobia crept into American culture during this time, a pronounced fear of the "Other," like Muslims, during the War on Terror. Accordingly, the boogey-men of "road trip gone wrong" horror movies often inhabit foreign lands (*Hostel*, *Hostel 2*), or geographically isolated regions (a desert in the *Hills Have Eyes*, rural Texas in *Chainsaw*, the Australian Outback in *Wolf Creek*), and often operate in tribes, families, or "cells." A savage family controls a town in the remake of *Chain-saw*. Deformed mutants zealously guard their bombed out 1950s town in the remake of *Hills*. Sometimes the uncivilized and dangerous

region is a representation of economic collapse. In *House of Wax* (2005), travelers stumble quaint American small town that time—and the American economy—forgot.

Space Horror

Outer space is the final frontier, and the horrific frontier, according to genre movies in the first decade of the 21st century. Although a great horror movie in this format, *Event Horizon* (1997), had bombed with audiences



Space Horror films like *Alien* (1979) and *Event Horizon* (1997) continued to be made in the 2000s. *Pitch Black* featured a spaceship crew marooned on a planet of flying carnivores. Top: Cole Hauser as Johns. Bottom: film director David Twohy.

the previous decade, the sub genre that gave the world films such as *Alien* (1979), John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) and *Aliens* (1986) came back strong in the 2000s.

John Carpenter has stated many times that there are two types of horror narratives. One involves the horror outside our tribe that attacks our tribe. The other type of horror occurs when the horror or monster strikes from within our tribe. In this latter form, the monster is us; it comes from within.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks provided both types of horror for the genre to mull over, and chew on. The terrorists were foreign born nationals, of course, but they were " sleeper agents " secretly operating without interference in our country, in America. The terror was from both the inside, and the outside. Horror films featuring outer space, or aliens in space or on Earth, tread that same ground easily.

They could be from another planet, but also ... gestating inside of us.

Accordingly, the aughts provided movies set on other worlds with extra-planetary threats like *Pitch Black* (2000), but also stories of alien invasion or incursion here on Earth, in efforts such as *AVP* (2004), *AVP: Requiem* (2007), and a new version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, this time titled simply, *Invasion* (2007).

John Carpenter's *Ghosts of Mars* (2001) was released almost immediately before the 9/11 attacks, in late August of that year, and met with absolutely savage reviews, the worst in Carpenter's career since *The Thing* in '82. Yet in the years since *Ghosts of Mars* release, many critics have seen it as involving the very concepts that would dominate the decade's "War on Terror" era space films.

Writing in *Literature/Film Quarterly* in 2002, scholar Tom Whalen called *Ghosts of Mars* "the most timely, if not prescient Hollywood film of Summer 2001," and noted that the film is "about one thing: dominion."¹⁴

Eerily, the film features undetectable Martian ghosts, spirits who—very much like sleeper cell terrorists of Al Qaeda—can move about undetected in human form. They take over the bodies of your friends, your compatriots, or the soldiers who are supposed to protect you; and they can't be detected at first. They exist both outside the tribe, and now, inside the tribe, to hark back to Carpenter's discussion of the genre's types.

More importantly, *Ghosts of Mars* is indeed about blowback and "dominion," the idea that decades of American interference in the foreign affairs of other nations, like, for example, the installation of the Shah of Iran by Americans in 1953's Operation Ajax, "would be met, finally, with rebellion and terror." The film's Martian warriors wake up from a long slumber to find humans mining their planet, settling their planet,

perhaps even "occupying" it, and fight to reclaim it. Many historians and diplomats see the 9/11 terror attacks as similar blowback, an asymmetrical attack meant to protest America's involvement in Middle East affairs, in countries such as Iran, Iraq, and most importantly, Saudi Arabia.

The differential in Martian and human fighting styles even seems to hark back to 21st-century American politics. The Martians use cutting weapons and blades (like the box cutters of the 9/11 hijackers). The humans, meanwhile, use high tech weapons, and mirroring America's superiority over Iran and Iraq, even nuclear weapons, which are deployed to put down the insurrection. It is downright strange how a film that was created before 9/11 so eerily echoed the context of that tragedy. As Whalen points out, the Martians who "inhabit the humans ... form training camps where they chant and exercise in rhythm" and like the terrorists on the planes that were hijacked, "all their weapons are handmade, they don't use guns."¹⁵

Carpenter is the talent who made comment about the AIDS plague even before it was in full swing (*John Carpenter's The Thing*), and who took on Reaganism in the 1980s (*They Live*), so it may be no surprise that his 2001 film gazed at America's history of interference in the affairs of other nations (especially those with Oil Reserves) ahead of 9/11 and crafted a film that would take on the concepts of dominion and blowback.

And, of course, he could have been reading the tea leaves. In October of 2000, for instance, Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda attacked the U.S.S. *Cole* in a terrorist bombing. Like so many artists, Carpenter was able to create something that looked back, to a siege story like the one seen in *Zulu* (1964), and connected it meaningfully to our present, in a story about the future.

AVP (Alien vs. Predator) has also been viewed, frequently, through the lens of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the film, the final woman, Alexa, teams up with a predator, Scar, to defeat the savage, animalistic xenomorphs of the *Alien* saga. Scholars have viewed this alliance as a kind of "Coalition of the Willing," between unlike people to defeat a threat outside the symmetrical nature of State vs. State warfare. Both humanity and the Predators hail from technological states with hierarchies of order and control. They possess different ideologies and goals, and no doubt vastly different governing forms. Yet they join forces to stop an asymmetrical threat, the fast-breeding Aliens, which—because they gestate in secret inside biological hosts—again can be substitutes for Al Qaeda's hidden sleeper cell agents. As author Zelma Catalan notes in "Aliens, Predators and Global Issues: The evolution of a Narrative Formula," this Coalition of the Willing may intentionally look familiar:

So, left entirely on her own, Alexa has no choice but to resort to an alliance with the predator. “The enemy of my enemy is my ally,” she says, and teams up with the technological savage who alone can overpower the biological perfection of the alien. The contingency of her tactical move reverberates with echoes from political decisions made by the West through the 1980s and 1990s. Its rationale emerges from the awareness that evil has the power to transcend borders and should be contained by collective, rather than individual effort. There is in this a strand the optimism characteristic of the post-2001 years when the hope that international threats such as Al Qaeda, or the drug cartels in Latin America, could be quashed, if not eliminated, provided there was concerted international effort. But what the film ultimately shows through its narrative is that the victory achieved in this way is only provisional. For the dangerous Other to civilization has yet another quality not envisaged by its humanistically-minded opponents—it can produce hybrids not only with its superior humans but also with its own enemy.¹⁶

The Invasion (2007) went a different way, suggesting that the War on Terror is a result, finally, of humanity’s irrationality and impulsive nature. In all previous filmed versions of this material, in 1956, 1978, and in 1990, the thing that makes the “Pod People” or alien invaders so hideous is the fact that they removed emotion—and love—from humanity’s blueprint. If they won the planet, they would eliminate love. The 2007 version notes that the aliens will bring peace to a world on fire. Through out the film, reference is made to the Iraq Occupation, tensions with North Korea, and even Hurricane Katrina. When the aliens gain the upper hand, all such conflicts stop. World peace is achieved. The humans strike back, take back the planet ... and the conflicts begin again. This is perhaps the most caustic of all *Body Snatchers* films, in part because it also notes that prescription drug usage in the 2000s has already turned us into the equivalent of numb, emotionally flat “Pod People.” Furthermore, the film suggests that we would rather go on killing and murdering each other than live in a world of rationality and stability.

If love comes hand-in-hand with hate, is it worth preserving?

Doom (2005) was a military alien movie in the mode of *Aliens* (1986), though much less well-done. It involves a team of soldiers contending with the spill over from a Lovecraftian space gate. Basically, the aliens invade a human installation on Mars, and our soldiers must adopt the War on Terror premise of President George W. Bush, who insisted that the purpose of the Iraq War was defense of the homeland. “We are fighting them over there, so we don’t have to fight them here, in the United States of America,” he declared in a speech on August 28, 2007.

Pandorum (2009) is another space horror of the decade, and it involves crew members of a generational spaceship far from Earth, awaking to find that something has gone terribly wrong. Their spaceship was now overrun with the cannibalistic, savage ancestors of the sleepers on the ship. In this case, the relation to the 2000s is a bit more abstract, but again not too difficult to detect. In the 2000s, America became engaged in an unpopular war had suffered a brutal surprise attack. A space shuttle had been destroyed in an accident. A Bush was once more in the White House, and the rich were getting richer while the poor and middle class were losing ground. In short, America—which had fought for Civil Rights in the 1960s and had landed a man on the moon in 1969—seemed to be devolving; to be repeating earlier mistakes.

Pandorum represents this future of an atavistic past taking hold. Author Katarzyna Pisarska’s *Darwin’s Monsters: Evolution, Science and the Gothic in Alvar’s Pandorum* elaborates on this notion:

...the beastly hominids of *Pandorum*, who supplant humans at the top of the food chain, are both our heirs in the evolutionary scheme and our returned ancestors from out of mind.... As the barbarous past materializes on Elysium, the spaceship becomes a Gothic space where human-kind lapses into monstrosity.¹⁷

Another beloved space horror film of the decade is *Pitch Black* (2000), which meditates on a very 2000s concept, that evil, in the form of convict Richard B. Riddick (Vin Diesel) is required to fight evil, manifested as alien flying dragons. This premise—it takes evil to defeat evil—feels like a guiding principle of the Bush Administration in the War on Terror as it authorized torture, indefinite incarceration, and pre-emptive warfare as the key tools to fight an aggressive War on Terror. The Administration’s answer to the Vietnam War quandary was not the consensus lesson most Americans had learned from that quagmire, that it wasn’t a war that ever should have been fought in the first place. Rather, the Administration seemed to believe that if it only used the most brutal, un-American tactics possible, it would emerge victorious in the conflict. The thesis proved faulty, in the end. American forces have now fought in Afghanistan and Iraq longer than American forces served in Europe or the Pacific in World War II. And this time, America’s ideals were sacrificed to boot.

One of the weirdest and most fun space horrors of the decade was *Jason X* (2001), which sees *Friday the 13th*’s Jason Voorhees awakened from cryogenic sleep in the distant future, a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994)–style world of holodecks and fully functional androids. Once Jason is awake in this brave new world, he resumes his murderous activities with glee, and

is even rebuilt as a kind of “Borg” Jason thanks to some helpful medical nanites. The film is tongue-in-cheek, and self-reflexive but was not met with much popularity or acclaim.

Other space horrors of the decade include Danny Boyle’s *Sunshine* (2007) about a mission to re-start Earth’s sun, and the presence of a mad terrorist, a zealot, imperiling that mission, again a reflection of the religious nature of the 9/11 attacks. And *Supernova* (2000) is a weird kind of *Dead Calm* (2000) in space, with a dangerous psychopath possessing what might be interpreted as a weapon of mass destruction, the ostensible reason for prosecuting the War against Iraq. In *Supernova*’s weird final twist, the weapon of mass destruction is launched, and sent on its way towards Earth, an attack on the motherland that is never resolved.

“They transcend themselves. They are transfigured”: Torture Porn

Although the so-called “Savage Cinema” horror films of unusual and graphic brutality—goes back at least as far as the late 1960s (*Night of the Living Dead* [1968]) and reached a zenith, perhaps, in the 1970s with titles such as Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *Deliverance* (1972), the 2000s witnessed the birth of a new movement in graphic horror filmmaking that was met by mainstream society with widespread dislike and dismay.

At first, this trend was termed “gorno,” a mildly imaginative combination of the words “gore” and “porno.” But then the comparison between horror and porn soon became literal. In 2006, *New York Magazine*’s critic David Edelstein coined the descriptor “torture porn.”¹⁸ As one can see, this descriptor actually utilized the word porn, and thus characterized a brand of horror movie as filthy, or obscene. Edelstein wrote that he was “baffled about how far this new stuff goes ... and by why America seems so nuts these days about torture.”¹⁹ On the positive side, the critic also noted that the “victims are neither interchangeable nor expendable,”²⁰ and accurately tagged Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* (2004) as a torture porn film in which Jesus Christ was the victim.

In 2007, in their text *Sexuality and Social Work*, authors Julie Bywater and Rhiannon Jones write that even though victims in torture porn films are both female and male, these films are “particularly dehumanizing and misogynist” and part of a wider trend of depicting women as “highly sexualized prey”²¹ in the culture. Meanwhile, long-time horror fans, writing on their blogs, also derided these films as lacking aesthetic value and qualities. *City Beat* author TT Stern Enzi wrote that the films were “thoughtless fantasies,” and that “in most



Torture Porn Boogeyman: The Jigsaw Murderer (Tobin Bell)—a diabolical puppet master—headlined six *Saw* installments from 2004 to 2009.

instances this [torture porn] is done with no underlying perspective for critical, social, or cultural discussions of the effect of violence on our collective psyches.”²² Further, the author also looked outside the United States for the origins of torture porn, fingering Gaspar Noé’s *Irreversible* (2002) as patient zero in the new plague affecting American cinemas.

It is true that outside the United States, the 2000s saw the rise of a new film format in France, the New French Extremity, a movement which is connected, for certain, to torture porn. According to horror scholar and author Alexandra West in her treatise, *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity*, the movement in France (with such adherents as the aforementioned Noé, and Alexandre Aja), “sees art-house and genre-directors converge to mediate on the most horrific aspects of life and what remains after those social veneers are stripped away. While they do not offer moral lessons, they offer an unsettling catharsis.”²³ In addition, West noted that these films and filmmakers revealed to audience that “a new critical reading can emerge and engage with contemporary culture through a language of violence, pain and cruelty.... Their focus on transformation through violence and sexuality is truly exciting and engaging, allowing an audience to explore the most human of desires through the thin safety net of a screen.”²⁴

What West’s brilliant exploration of this form reveals is that the New French Extremity, and its cousin, Torture Porn, accomplished is not to be belittled or ignored. These films do reflect vividly on the culture that created them and ask questions of that culture through their application of violence, and through their characters’ endurance in the face of it.

But there is no need to bring the French into a discussion of responsibility for Torture Porn as a format, because torture was one of the key American issues of the War on Terror Age. One of the most popular TV series of that era is *24* (2001–2008), a series that follows a counter-terrorist agent, Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) as he attempts to thwart terrorist attacks in real time. When necessary, Jack often resorts to torturing suspects. In *The Christian Science Monitor* in 2014, writer David Mataconis asked a pertinent and relevant question in the title of his article “Did *24* Help Make Torture Acceptable?” Mataconis writes, “Bauer and his rotating cast of enablers had no choice but to go rogue.... He didn’t like torturing terrorists, but that damn clock was always ticking in the corner of your screen, and neither he nor we had the time for legal niceties.”²⁵

With the threat of another 9/11 always looming, Americans made their choice that torture, in crucial situations, was necessary. For eight years on the air as a top-rated program, *24* pushed this agenda. It was one that dovetailed nicely with the Bush Administration’s refrain that the next attack on America could “come in the form of a mushroom cloud,” as President Bush said on 10/08/02²⁶ or the more-commonly remembered variant of the same phrase, “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud,” as Condoleezza Rice spoke the words on 9/08/02.²⁷ A frightened American populace, fearing millions of casualties in a nuclear strike, approved torture of suspects as an acceptable alternative to the prospect of such total destruction and misery.

At least one idea behind the torture porn genre is that if America is willing to violate its idealistic soul and beliefs in personal freedom to commit torture, then that idea would “trickle down” to the rest of the world, thus endangering American citizens too.

On February 7, 2002, President Bush signed a memo “Humane Treatment of Taliban and al Qaeda Detainees” that essentially “authorized and directed” the “formal abandonment of America’s commitment to key provisions of the Geneva Convention.” According to Andrew Cohen’s article in *The Atlantic*, “The Torture Memos, 10 Years Later,” it was this memo that “marked” America’s descent “into torture.” The loophole that allowed such torture was that al Qaeda was considered a stateless entity, and so the provisions of the Geneva Convention did not apply to it.

In practice, this meant that America could warehouse captured enemy combatants at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba or Abu Ghraib in Iraq without ever giving them a fair trial. It meant that said prisoners could be questioned without due process, using what the Bush Administration euphemistically termed “enhanced interrogation techniques.” These techniques included waterboarding,

sleep disruption, deprivation of food and water, and medically unnecessary procedures such as “rectal feeding.” In Gitmo at least, the rules for detaining, holding, and processing prisoners created a Kafka-esque type system from which detainees could never escape. Roughly eighty percent of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay were actually captured by Pakistanis and Afghans for a bounty (5,000 dollars apiece), but because they were not afforded fair trials, they could not prove their innocence.²⁸ They weren’t terrorists, per se. They were moneymakers, cash cows for local warlords who wanted to get rich.

For Americans, the realization that their government was torturing prisoners in the name of their security arrived in mid-2004. Journalist Seymour Hersh wrote an expose published in *The New Yorker* “Torture at Abu Ghraib,” which revealed that from October through December of 2003, prisoners at the prison had been subject to “sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuse”²⁹ at the hands of their wardens in the American military. The guards had been accused of beating and sodomizing prisoners, attacking detainees with dogs, and taunting and humiliating naked prisoners. Photographs of these “enhanced interrogation techniques” reached the press and led President Bush to explain that it was the work of a “few bad apples.” No responsibility was taken for the memos which negated the Geneva Convention, or which authorized the enhanced interrogation techniques.

Some in the right wing press, wishing to support its President and mitigate the disgust many Americans felt for abuse and torture, claimed that waterboarding was not so bad. Fox News’ anchor Sean Hannity, for instance suggested that waterboarding was not actually a torture method on 5/20/09, and told his guest, Charles Grodin, that he would submit to waterboarding to prove it was not torture. “I’ll do it for charity. I’ll let you do it. I’ll do it for the troop’s families,” Hannity promised Grodin and his viewers, live on-air.³⁰

As of this book’s writing in 2020, Hannity had still not scheduled his promised charitable good deed or supported the troops families by undergoing the waterboarding procedure. Perhaps, post-Bush Administration, Hannity no longer felt it necessary to carry, if you’ll forgive the pun, its water on state-sanctioned torture.

The point is that the culture from 2000 to 2009, from pop-entertainment like *24* and *Passion of the Christ*, to secret government memos, to Fox News—was consumed with the idea of torture and its place in war, law enforcement, and prison.

Given the evidence that torture occurred, how could critics, like the one in *City Beat*, claim that torture porn horror movies had no deeper purpose or theme? Art

always imitates life. And if torture porn horror movies were dark, sadistic and upsetting, it may just be that it was mirroring what it saw happening in American culture. But horror movies didn't start the culture's fascination with torture and abuse. Rather, the best of the torture porn horror films accomplished what great horror films have always accomplished: they made the audience look at itself and what was happening in its name.

The debate itself—re-argued endlessly with the arrival of each new *Saw* or *Hostel* installment—is hypocritical to a large extent. Some of the same genre voices who so vociferously defended and championed the once hated slasher movie trend of the 1980s were among the first to jump on the bandwagon deriding torture porn. Yet in both cases, these horror films (whether slasher or torture porn) decisively reflect what's happening in American culture. One can't (or at least shouldn't) blame torture porn efforts for holding up a mirror to our contemporary beliefs, to current events, to modern mindsets and fallacies. Certainly, the torture porn films—just like the slasher films that came before them—abundantly feature their own brand of highs and lows. But to dismiss an entire sub-genre out of hand with an easy, negative label is to miss out on some powerful, worthwhile material.

This author is old enough to remember when it was the slasher film that was termed an “*incitement to violence*,” and directors of the form (including John Carpenter and Brian De Palma) were actually called “*pornographers*” by the likes of journalists such as Zina Klapper, writing in *Ms. Magazine*.³¹ This author is old enough to remember when Janet Maslin in *The New York Times* (back in 1982) wrote of slashers: “*you leave the theater convinced that the world is an ugly, violent place in which aggression is frequent and routine.*”³² This author remembers when *Commonweal*'s critic, Tom O'Brien said that *Friday the 13th* “*literalizes the violence against women [that] feminist groups have identified as the core of pornography.*”³³

Today, not a single *Friday the 13th* movie or other slasher film of the 1980s can compare in terms of severity of on-screen violence to a typical episode of *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), which wallowed in castration, incest, rape, murder, torture, beheadings and other atrocities for seven seasons to a degree that makes the 1980s horror films, and even some 2000s torture films, look like children's fairy tales by comparison.

What the over-the-top reaction to torture porn filmmaking in the 2000s reveals, perhaps, is the fact the mainstream press is ever eager to welcome horror with closed arms and unwilling to view it with respect, or the presumption that it boasts artistic intentions. Many in the press always wants to link horror and pornography,

and in this decade, the press was more successful in that agenda than ever before. The Torture Porn controversy of the 2000s proved that many of the horror genre's scholars, critics, and writers had grown just as old and inflexible as the previous generation of genre gatekeepers had. The Old Guard had revered Hammer or Universal films by putting down slasher movies.

Now the generation that revered slasher movies was putting down Torture Porn.

One of the main ideas underlining the torture-porn cycle in the horror film is indeed pro-social. And that idea is that nobody escapes from the violence unscathed. A good person (like a good nation) might escape the lion's share of the violence, but to do so, would have to cut off a limb (or a sense of conscience? Its soul?).

No longer were there going to be “clean” victories over boogymen, only wars of attrition in which the most whole—though not completely whole—would emerge victorious. Good torture porn movies, like good horror films of all stripes, are all about pushing boundaries, about shattering taboos, about transgressing traditional senses of decorum, and that's what films like *Hostel*, *Saw*, the *Last House on the Left* remake and *Martyrs* accomplish.

The question becomes: are these transgressions based purely on puerile, sadistic impulses? Or do they carry with them a higher *aesthetic* purpose? Do these movies tell us something critical about “*who we are*” at this juncture in history? Is there a purpose and morality to the violence featured on screen, or is it all just bread and circuses?

The simple answer, of course—*exactly like the slasher film before it*—is that the fair-minded individual and reviewer should take each example on its own merits, and judge on a case by-case basis. One should not paint an entire classification of horror film with one easy brushstroke.

At its apex, the torture porn format addresses several important aspects of War on Terror culture with cogent authority. First, it reflects the reality that the media *already* inundates us on the 24-hours cable news networks with ultra-violent images on a nearly daily basis. From government-authorized imagery of vanquished enemy corpses (Saddam's Hussein's sons) to battlefield imagery itself, America has witnessed a lot of real-life “horror” since 9/11. Citizens saw torture in the photographs from the Abu Ghraib scandal, and also fictional torture performed routinely by American “heroes” like Jack Bauer on 24. And the *New York Times* wouldn't even use the word “torture” when the term applied to the United States doing it. When we torture, it's “*coercive interrogation techniques.*” President Bush has also said he would authorize water boarding all over again.

To quote Bob Dole: “where’s the outrage?”

The answer? It’s in the *moral barometer* of the horror film. If we visit torture upon others for our own reasons, is it right for other nations to visit torture upon our people, on Americans? This is the subtext or context of the *Hostel* films: *blowback*.

Even if we truly boast noble motives for torture (preserving security, sponsoring democracy across the world) does that behavior make us heroes or monsters? The self-same question applies to *Jigsaw* (Tobin Bell), a horror movie icon who also has “pure” motives for the torture he inflicts upon others. He wants to “help” them. He wants to “free them” from their demons.

The very best of the torture porn films deal with this admittedly gruesome subject matter in a thoughtful manner. *Martyrs* seems to ask, what comes after torture? What arises inside a person after such brutality? Until Americans deal decisively and responsibly with what was done in our names, for our “security,” this repressed evil will bubble up and return as symptoms, certainly in our entertainment, especially our *dark* entertainment. The form mirrors our worst fears, our darkest psychological demons. Horror can comment on our times in a way that other genres can’t and don’t. Love them or hate them, torture porn films fit this definition to a tee. They live up to the historical legacy of the horror format.

Don’t blame the messenger. Torture porn films may not be to everyone’s personal taste, but at the very least they have a right to exist, and more so, serve a valuable social purpose within the pop culture, at least in the War on Terror Age.

*“You made the world in your image.
Now I make it in mine”: Vampires*

One of the oldest monsters of the cinema, the vampire, underwent some major changes in the 1990s. Films such as *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992) and the Anne Rice adaptation *Interview with a Vampire* (1994) introduced romance and Byronic heroism into the mix. No longer was the vampire a solitary, repulsive figure who expressed the idea of a foreign invasion of the western world. Instead, the vampire was often attractive, isolated, and broody about their eternal torment. Taking the opposite approach, some vampire films of the 1990s, such as *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) and *John Carpenter’s Vampires* (1998) de-romanticized the vampire. Set in the American southwest, or Mexico, these films positioned the vampires as bottom-feeding scavengers and desert-dwellers.

Perhaps the biggest influence on 2000s horror films, however, came from a beloved 1990s TV franchise by



The *Twilight Saga* (2008–2012) brought a new spin on vampires, another familiar screen monster reinvented for the 21st century. Here, franchise stars Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson) and Bella Swan (Kristen Stewart) enjoy a daytime swim.

former geek king, Joss Whedon. That franchise consisted of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), and its spin-off, *Angel* (1999–2005). In both series, vampires were transformed into James Dean-type loners who carried the burden of their long lives and appetite for blood. *Angel* (David Boreanaz) was a brooding, regretful introvert, and a hunk. *Spike* (James Marsters) was an acerbic, British punk-rocker in leather, with dyed blond hair, who, like *Angel*, actually sported a sensitive soul. At least once he acquired one.

So, while the series extraordinary hero, *Buffy* (Sarah Michelle Gellar) battled and staked monstrous vampires, she also romanced them. Leading into the 2000s vampires, though immortal, were young ... and hot.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer had an enormous impact on the decade of the 2000s, and the idea of gorgeous, young-appearing vampires was ubiquitous. Jonathan Schaech was a vampire pack leader in the road movie, *The Forsaken* (2001), which also was set in the American southwest. And Jonathan Rhys Meyers played a similarly attractive vampire cult leader, though not named as a creature of the night, in *Octane* (2003). Meanwhile, direct-to-video sequels to *Vampires* and *From Dusk Till*

Dawn, such as *Los Muertos* (2002) or *The Hangman's Daughter* (2000) attempted to continue the desert scavenger motif, but with limited success, or interest from viewers.

Instead, a series of books by author Stephenie Meyer, took the baton from *Buffy*, and featured even younger, broodier vampires in *The Twilight Saga*, which began its cinematic run in 2008.

"*Buffy kicked off the longest vampire surge yet*," Christopher Beam and Chris Wilson wrote in *Slate*, "The Garlic Years," in 2009, "opening the door to *Blade*, the *Underworld* films, John Carpenter's *Vampires*, *Van Helsing* and the multimedia blockbuster *Twilight* series. By any measure, 2006 was the vampirest year of all time."³⁴

Twilight proved a massive hit and pop culture touchstone, both in terms of the books, and their movie adaptations. Meyer's books sold 100 million copies, and with the movies grossed more than 500 million dollars at the box office. *The Twilight Saga* led almost immediately to further vampire stories on TV, notably *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–2016) and *True Blood* (2008–2014). Both those series, like the *Twilight Saga*, featured sexually attractive and active vampires, who fell in love with human women.

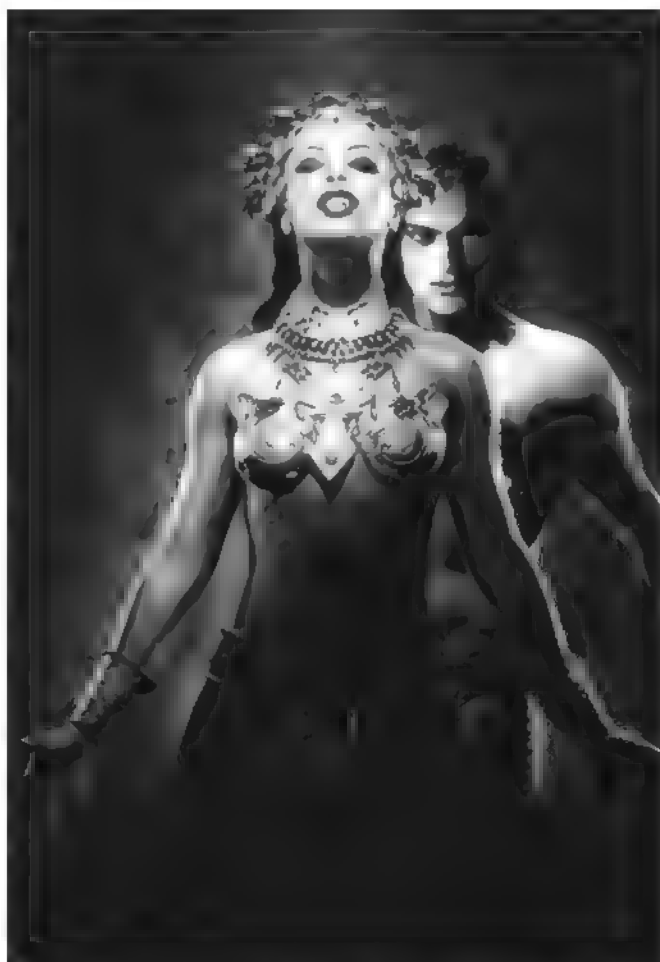
It was a huge shift in the form of the vampire.

No longer was the monster a creature of repulsive appearance, representing non-western ideals slipping into western society. The Dracula Paradigm was replaced. Instead, the vampires of *Twilight* lived in the Pacific Northwest, attempted to accommodate in American culture as immigrants, essentially, and, though hundreds of years old, did things like attend local American high schools, and date high school girls. *Twilight* was the story of Bella, a young woman in the town of Forks, and her love story with a pale vampire named Edward Cullen. Edward resisted their relationship for fear of hurting the human girl, but Bella only wanted to move deeper into his exotic (and erotic?) world.

"I see a change in the western world in terms of greater acceptance, understanding and empathy with the concept of difference," suggest Dr. Magdalena Grabias, an assistant professor in Cultural Studies in 2016. "The vampire is increasingly being portrayed as a hero rather than as a villain, in a reversal of the role."³⁵

"Meyer's vampires could walk around in daylight like *The Lost Boys*, were devastatingly alluring like Anne Rice's Lestat, and called themselves vegetarians, preferring to drink only animal blood like Rice's Louis—but their skin also literally glittered in the sun, a purely YA romance-tailored addition," wrote author Devon Maloney in *Wired*, in 2014. The author called the series "whitewashed vampire romance to the nth degree."³⁶

Although incredibly popular, particularly with young teenage women, the *Twilight Saga* was immediately



The Anne Rice Chronicles, with its Byronic vampires, also tried for a reboot in the 2000s with *Queen of the Damned* starring Aaliyah (front and center) and Stuart Townsend as Lestat.

controversial with long-time horror fans who, in the 2000s, had a powerful public platform by which to deride the series. One prominent horror blogger of the age, for instance, termed the series, repeatedly, "*Twatlight*." The hatred towards the saga was venomous, and instead of horror fans lining up on Team Edward or Team Jacob (Bella's werewolf suitor), they lined up as either pro *Twilight* or anti-*Twilight*.

The anti-*Twilight* camp viewed the series as anti-feminist, with bland heroine Bella seeming to be "the epitome of submissive passivity."³⁷ In particular, Edward compared his attraction to Bella to a drug addiction in the 2008 film, meaning his response to her presence was chemical, not anything that had to do with her personality, or agency.

And Bella's choice, to lock herself into a romantic relationship in which she was in physical danger, since sex with vampires results in bruises and cuts, was seen by many as a choice to be a victim. Unlike Whedon's feminist icon, *Buffy*, who was a grand evolution of the Final

Girl trope, *Twilight*'s Bella seemed to many writers a huge step backwards, a woman who defined herself only by which man, or "team," she chose to be with.

Author Meyer insisted that *Twilight* was a work of feminist fiction, not anti feminist, and defended her characters and franchise. "*In my own opinion, (key word), the foundation of feminism is this: being able to choose. The core of anti-feminism, is, conversely, telling a woman she can't do something solely because she's a woman—taking any choice away from her specifically because of her gender.*"³⁸

In other words, Bella had the right to choose to be in a painful, physically dangerous relationship, because it was her desire, her choice to do so.

As the closing years of the decade came, debates about *Twilight* raged.

Was it even horror?

Was it anti-feminist, or pro-feminist?

Was *Twilight* a degradation and bastardization of the vampire myth, or simply a natural evolution of the monster, post *Buffy* and *Angel*?

Well, ticket buyers had spoken.

Despite its dismissal," the authors of *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media and The Vampire Franchise*, write "the female-oriented *Twilight* franchise is comparable in profit and cultural impact to other well-respected media franchises such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Harry Potter*."³⁹

Others who had derided *Twilight* during its theatrical run ultimately came to the viewpoint that the primarily male-driven mainstream press had derided Meyers' saga because it was designed not for their enjoyment, but for the enjoyment of an apparently underserved demographic: teenage girls. "What is the difference between *Twilight* moms who turn their bedrooms into shrines for Edward and Bella, and Dads who did the same thing for *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, or any other male-targeted franchise?" asked Princess Weekes in *The Mary Sue*, in 2018. "The difference is that we have assumed that one has more value, even at its weakest points, than the other."⁴⁰

Of this, there can be no doubt

While critics of *Twilight* worked long and hard to argue that it was anti-feminist (and indeed, it might very well be), the same critics championed *Star Wars*, a saga which, when it began in 1977, featured a universe with literally no people of color and also highlighted Nazi imagery in its film-ending medal ceremony on Yavin 4. This observation is not meant to put down *Star Wars*, but, as always, to point out that not all popular franchises are created equal in the eyes of critics and the press.

The *Twilight* films are not, in the eyes of this writer, particularly well-made or involving. They seem humorless (especially compared to *Buffy*), and derivative (again,

compared to the *Buffyverse*). They also would not fit this author's definition of "feminism."

However, critics of *Twilight*—including this author—should acknowledge that, in many cases, these films were not aimed at them, or made for them. The widespread dismissal of *Twilight* by establishment critics might be viewed in some ways, as a dismissal of the idea that teenage girls deserve a pop culture franchise that speaks to them and their interests.

Twilight was not the only vampire game in town in the 2000s. If *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* appears (the superior) inspiration for that *Twilight Saga*, another franchise took its cues from another popular movie franchise: *The Matrix* (1999).

As noted in *Vox*, by author Peter Suderman, *Underworld* (2003) "borrows a number of surface attributes" from *The Matrix* "including the superpowered gunplay and stylish black fetish-war costuming. Like the *Matrix*, it features gun-toting characters in long, dark coats, blasting their way through grimy corridors."⁴¹

Derided in some circles as "vampires with gun movies," *Underworld* and the vast majority of its sequels (excluding 2009's *Rise of the Lycans*) focused on a vampire death dealer named Selene, played by Kate Beckinsale. Like *Twilight*, the *Underworld* series focused on vampire vs. werewolf (er, Lycans...) tensions, though in this case those tensions resulted in war. The focus was heavily on action, rather than horror, which again demonstrated a post *Scream* (1996) desire on the part of filmmakers to throw old elements into a blender and create a new sub-genre.

The *Underworld* saga often featured confusing plots and exposition, and incoherent editing, yet nonetheless made a star of Beckinsale. The films also featured a consistent look which many critics described as being the color equivalent of black and white, without really being black-and-white. The *Underworld* films were all shaded in tones of blues and silvers, and this consistent canvas hid a multitude of dramatic sins.

The *Blade* series, which had begun in 1998, also continued into the first decade of the 21st century with *Blade 2* (2002), and *Blade: Trinity* (2004). Like the *Underworld* films, the sequels featured vampires, but concentrated on super-heroic action rather than the traditional narrative territory of the horror film.

If *Twilight* and *Underworld* met with mixed approval from critics, though approbation from audiences, the opposite was true of *Let the Right One In* (2008), a sensitive vampire film from Sweden. Set in the 1980s, the film concerned a lonely boy who befriended a vampire, another outsider, in a wintry world of unending snow. The horror blogger community took up a strong defense of the film, even if general audiences did not buy

the mood piece as the defining vampire film of the decade.

Some old vampire standards were also updated for the aughts. *Wes Craven Presents Dracula 2000* brought Bram Stoker's character back but, according to press materials, this time as "the most sensual and sexual of all our modern anti-heroes," according to film director Patrick Lussier.⁴² Anne Rice's Lestat also returned to the screen as a rock star, in *Queen of the Damned* (2001).

Video Games: Game Over?

What happens when two art forms that are not widely appreciated by the mainstream press or mainstream academia join forces?

If history is a guide, then the result is, mostly, enhanced critical disdain.

In the 2000s, video games and horror cinema combined in a series of cinematic efforts such as *Resident Evil* (2002), *House of the Dead* (2003), *Alone in the Dark* (2004), *Doom* (2005), and *Silent Hill* (2006).

Of course, because of their commonalities, video games and horror movies should be a match made in pop culture heaven. As scholar Bernard Perron writes in his book, *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, "the goals of video games and the goals of horror fiction directly overlap, making them ideal bedfellows."⁴³ He expands on this notion by observing that "since horror works best the less that is explained and more that is left to the imagination, it maps well to game storytelling."⁴⁴

Alas, that has not been the case, or at least it was not the case during the span 2000–2009. According to author Scott A. Lukas in *Horror Video Game Remakes and the Question of the Medium: Remaking Doom, Silent Hill and Resident Evil*, "the video game transformed as film problematizes the category of remake and also complicates the genre and territorial distinctions of video games and cinema."⁴⁵

In other words, horror film remakes of video games



In the 2000s, even the most respected and classic screen vampires returned. Top: Gerard Butler plays a hunky Count Dracula in *Wes Craven Presents Dracula 2000*. Bottom: Dracula has taken two brides, Vitamin C (left) and Jennifer Esposito (right).

tend to suffer the same disdain that remakes of horror film classics (such as *Halloween*), or J-Horror remakes invariably do. They are widely deemed illegitimate spawn of superior source materials. The "faithfulness" question is universally raised. Is the movie faithful to the gameplay? If not, it is judged a creative failure.

On the question of what makes a good remake, there are precious few criteria. In fact, the same is true of video games. Widely-speaking, video games are not

often considered works of arts. In the July 2006 edition of *Esquire*, for instance, in the column *Chuck Klosterman's America*, the author penned a piece called “The Lester Bangs of Video Games.” He concluded (perhaps rightly) that there is no Lester Bangs of video games. He wrote:

There are still people in America who do not take video games seriously. These are the same people who question the relevance of hip-hop and assume newspapers will still exist in twenty-five years. It's hard to find an irrefutably accurate statistic for the economic value of the video game industry, but the best estimates seem to be around \$28 billion. As such, I'm not going to waste any space trying to convince people that gaming is important. If you're reading this column, I'm just going to assume that you believe video games in 2006 are the cultural equivalent of rock music in 1967, because that's (more or less) reality.⁴⁶

Klosterman's column raises an important question. Are critics missing the boat on what is potentially the most influential art form of the 21st century? Have we—as a culture—and as critics—failed to come up with a common lexicon for legitimate criticism of video games? Klosterman sees the gap in video game “criticism” as arising directly from the fact that games are seen as “product” and little more. They are not seen in terms of narrative, but rather in terms of playability. This would be a little like going to the movies and reviewing the quality of the auditorium seating. If Mr. Klosterman is right and—outside of product—there exists no common set of aesthetic criteria for “video game criticism,” how can one judge movies based on video games?

Gazing at the video game adaptations of the 2000s without some criteria for aesthetic success, they appear a mangy bunch. *House of the Dead* is widely considered one of the worst films of the decade. *Doom* is not regarded much differently. It is a sub-par *Aliens* (1986)-type film with a diverse group of soldiers battling uninspiring alien monsters. *Resident Evil* spawned a successful horror movie franchise, but in doing so went far astray, narratively and in terms of characters, from the video game experience. The franchise, which headlines a strong female star, Milla Jovovich, went big for spectacular action sequence, apocalypse movie homages, and zombie tropes, rather than settling down in for a “haunted mansion” vibe, as was the case in the early *Resident Evil* games.

That leaves only *Silent Hill*, inarguably the best of the 2000s video game horror bunch, and an Orphean Journey through an underworld. Directed by Christopher Gans, *Silent Hill* finds room and space for a mood of alienation and isolation, as well as boss battles.

Intriguingly, two other horror films of the 2000s focused on the idea of horror video games but were not based on popular games. The first film was *Hellworld*

(2005), a direct-to-video *Hellraiser* sequel. The film lived in the world of horror movies, fan conventions, cosplay, and video games, with a kind of early MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) as the galvanizing or organizing principle of the film.

Stay Alive (2006), by contrast, concerned a horror survival game (like *Resident Evil*), featuring the Countess Bathory as a “boss.” Rather than charting new territory, except in terms of CGI visualizations of gameplay, *Stay Alive* resurrected the *Nightmare on Elm Street* rubber reality paradigm: die in a dream (or in a video game) and characters would also die in reality.

“Don't get all stingy with your bullets”: Zombies

The zombie is, perhaps, the greatest screen monster of the first decade of the 21st century. Zombies appeared often throughout the decade in found footage films (like *The Zombie Diaries* [2006], in light-hearted comedies like *Shaun of the Dead* [2004], in films based on video games like *Resident Evil* [2002]) and in remakes such as Zack Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* (2004).

Zombie maestro George A. Romero, who had not helmed a “living dead” zombie film since 1985, returned in the 2000s with three such sequels: *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). But there were many other zombie grace notes throughout the decade as well, efforts such as *Fido* (2007), which explored racism as it applied to domesticated zombies, and *Deadgirl* (2008), which concerned young human males behaving badly towards a female zombie.

With its focus on serial killers and interlopers, the 1990s had seen very few zombie films produced, but the monsters were back with a vengeance in the George W. Bush era. The popularity of this cinematic monster has been attributed to several factors that dovetailed with the emerging 21st-century culture. As pointed out by horror author Jonathan Mayberry in *Newsweek* in 2010, the zombie is “a stand-in for anything we fear: pandemic, racism, societal change, depersonalization of humanity,” or “pervasive threats.”⁴⁷ The zombie, in the author's words, are a “never-ending blank canvas.”⁴⁸ They are thus a “fascinating study of our country's historical fears,”⁴⁹ in the words of *Vox Magazine* in 2016.

These sources prove just how useful the zombie is as a “popular” monster, since it can represent different things and different aspects of society at different times. In terms of the 2000s, however, the zombie may most be associated with war, and economics, and the failure of leadership under President George W. Bush to manage these disasters effectively.

Consider that a zombie is a monster that has come back from the dead, but it is not alive, either. It is a destructive, consuming beast with no soul, no reason, and no purpose but to consume. This description of the zombie as something dead or corrupt that returns to imperil society anew might be applied both to the War on Terror, which failed to heed the lessons of the Vietnam War, and to George W. Bush's economic policy, which failed to learn the lessons of the first Bush recession, following the huge deficits of the Reagan Era. Both felt like zombie threats from a bygone era.

In Reagan's time, pundits and even W.'s father, George H.W. Bush himself, discussed the danger of the Gipper's "voodoo economics," and the fact that trickle-down policies would do nothing but further enrich the wealthy while destroying the American middle class. In 2010, author John Quiggin wrote a treatise which he called *Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk Among Us*, and the author noted that "a zombie idea is one that keeps coming back, despite being killed."⁵⁰ His thesis is that those in power—in the press, in big business, and in government in the 2000s—were dominated by zombie or failed economic ideas.

In fact, Bush's father, President George H.W. Bush, had been ousted from the presidency after an economic recession and a deepening of the budget deficit. His son's

economic policies double-downed on the same mistakes. When Bill Clinton left office in 2000, he had, through sound management of the economy and the power of the Internet boom, erased the Reagan-Bush deficits of the 1980s and early 1990s and created a surplus of 290 billion dollars. By the end of the second Bush era, however, that surplus was history. It had been given away through tax cuts to the rich via the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 and the Job and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003. As a result, the U.S. deficit stood at 485 billion when Bush the younger left office. In practical terms, those tax cuts meant that the government would receive 1.2 trillion dollars less over a ten-year period. It was money that might have been used to finance the expensive War on Terror, which added 2.4 trillion dollars to the national debt.

But the real zombie idea of the 2000s wasn't just the decision to engage by choice in an expensive, difficult, ongoing, unpopular war (Iraq) again, or to offer giveaways to the rich. The zombie idea was deeper.

Specifically, it was the notion that a political party and leader who did not believe in the ability of government to help people would somehow prove competent managers of the government during times of crisis such as the decade's terrorist attacks, the two recessions of (2001 and 2008, respectively) and national disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

Since the 1980s, the concept of "Starve the Beast" (a term reputedly originated by a Reagan staffer in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1985) had dominated conservative thinking about the government. The idea was that Republicans in power could so reduce government funds through tax giveaways to the rich that they could shrink the Federal government to the size where it could be "strangled in the bathtub." In other words, the government would be so small that it would not be able to take on big things like retirement benefits or universal health care.

But despite the economic fall-out of the Reagan years, voters sent George W. Bush to the White House in the 2000s so he could make the same mistakes. Yet what voters found during his eight years in office was, again, that someone who doesn't believe in the ability of government to



The zombies are coming! The zombies are coming! This still from Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) showcases the most popular monster of the 2000s, the zombie.

help the common man is not someone who can marshal its resources to help the common man when disaster occurs. Lest one forget, George W. Bush's choice to lead FEMA was neophyte Michael Brown, a neophyte whose previous experience had been to serve as Commissioner for the International Arabian Horse Association.

When Hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast, the Bush Administration and FEMA were caught flatfooted and unprepared to help. Again, if the government is to be starved, if the government is to be drowned in a bathtub, what happens in a time of hurricanes, war, or even pandemic? Americans, having gone down the road of such incompetence before, shouldn't have gone for the zombie idea in the 2000s that things would turn out better by doing the same thing all over again.

Accordingly, many of the zombie films of the 2000s concern the breakdown of American infrastructure during an apocalypse. Leadership fails, and the zombie plague spreads. A failure of a U.S. military occupation in Britain is the subject matter of *28 Weeks Later* (2006), a reflection of the poor leadership during the Iraq War, as the counterinsurgency spread. The film concerns a London where the zombie plague is believed to be "*in its final throes*," as Vice President Dick Cheney might report. Instead, it comes back swinging and the city is overrun.

George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005) involves the way that wealthy leaders look out for their own economic well being, while gatekeeping the door to wealth for others. The leader of a post-zombie society, played by Dennis Hooper, sees all the wealth concentrated at the top of the community, while those at the bottom must work dangerous jobs, such as procuring supplies from zombie-ridden towns nearby, without getting to enjoy any of the rewards. According to the text *The Subversive Zombie*, by Elizabeth Aiossa, the film "*focuses on broad and scathing criticism of Bush-era war mongering and classicism, and on an evolving and organizing zombie union*...."⁵¹

These and other zombie films of the 2000–2009 period focus heavily on the idea that in a zombie outbreak, the government would collapse. After years of failure to plan adequately, or budget for a disaster, the government's profound failure would result in anarchy in the land of the free and the home of the brave. These films might even be viewed as wish-fulfillment fantasies for blue collar workers who had gone bankrupt, lost their retirement during the Great Recession, or even have seen their families go without adequate health care because it was too expensive. In the zombie apocalypse, the rich elite would not make the rules for long, as seen by the downfall of the occupation in *28 Weeks Later*, or the collapse of the society in *Land of the Dead*.

Rather, the plague rewards "*skills in auto maintenance, farming, plumbing and electrical work*" and would land "*blue collar folks at the top of the new social order*."⁵² The fear of zombie overrun was thus also a fear of the rich and wealthy that they would suddenly no longer be able to control the world and its financial agenda, and that their skill set—nurtured on Wall Street—would not be a required survival tool in the new social realm.

In the zombie films, the skills of the blue collar and middle-class strike back, in a way, against the financial, corporate sector. It is their skills and most importantly, their competence, that would save the world.

The zombie films of the 2000s are all about the government failing to save the people, and from the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 to the Bush Administration's failure to evacuate in a timely fashion the Louisiana Superdome following Hurricane Katrina's landfall in 2005, the American people had plenty of opportunity to witness, often on CNN, often in real time, their government's failure to help those Americans in need in a crisis.

If not the American people's, whose interest was the government actually serving?

"Probably the most notable impact of 9/11 on zombie movies," writes Peter Dendle in *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia Volume 2, 2000–2010*, "*was a general sense that in a time of crisis people would not be able to depend on authorities for help*."⁵³ Dendle notes that the real life imagery people saw following Katrina was bracing: "*American were horrified at the images of citizens trapped in the Superdome without food or water, of rampant looting and heavy-handed police violence, and of bodies lying uncollected in the streets, images, in short, of a desperate, lawless wasteland, where civilization had become unraveled in only a few short days*."⁵⁴

On a much more grounded level, the 2000s brought up a new debate on the nature of the zombie itself. Could zombies ... run?

Old school horror fans, weaned on decades of George A. Romero's Living Dead movies, preferred the old-school zombie shuffle; the slow-moving ghoul. But a new generation of filmmaker reveled in the chaos and anarchy created by a heretofore unseen breed of running zombie, one who could overtake its victims in record time with animal ferocity. Josh Levin wrote in *Slate Magazine* in March of 2004 about the roiling debate in horror circles about the two types of zombies. The original *Dawn of the Dead* (1979) "*hammered home the slow zombie's metaphorical possibilities*," he suggested while, the remake's ultra-quick zombies perhaps represented a "*modern taste for individualism*."⁵⁵

PG-13 Horror Films, the Dangers of "Ratings Creep" and CGI

Although the PG-13 designation had been created by the MPAA in the mid-1980s, it was the decade of 9/11 that brought a slew of Hollywood horror movies with that particular rating.

This was a contradiction, it seems.

The same decade that brought viewers hard "R" movies such as those in the brutal *Saw* or *Hostel* franchise, simultaneously went in the other direction, bringing PG-13 horror films such as *The Ring* (2002), *AVP* (2004) and *White Noise* (2005) to younger horror enthusiasts.

The glut of PG-13 horror movies in the first decade of the 21st century, typically, pleased no particular demographic, except, perhaps, for Hollywood accountants. Societal watchdogs and moral guardians warned strenuously of "ratings creep," the notion that films which would have, in previous decades, been rated R (for ages 17 and up, only) for gory imagery had instead gotten by in the 2000s with the PG-13 rating, thus exposing damaging imagery and ideas to teenagers instead of those on the verge of adulthood.

According to author Filipna Antunes, who has studied extensively the PG-13 rating and its impact, these gatekeepers feared that "the existence of PG-13 has exposed children to some adult content that was previously controlled, thus challenging the meaning and purpose of the R rating and opening to the doors to concerns over child protection."⁵⁶ In her book, *Children Beware! Childhood, Horror and the PG-13 Rating* (2020), Antunes also described how the PG-13 rating was viewed by many as having "blurred the boundaries"⁵⁷ between PG and R.

Horror fans were livid, however, to see the glut of PG-13 horror films released during the decade. To the committed horror aficionado, a PG-13 designation meant that horror could not really be, well, horror, at least in the traditional sense. Historically, films such as *Alien* (1979), *The Shining* (1980), or *Friday the 13th* (1980) were rated R (Restricted) and therefore free to pursue their goriest and most taboo-shattering impulses. The very idea of PG-13 horror films portended a rounding-off or blunting of the genre's rough edges, it's very character.

Indeed, previous to *AVP*, for example, every individual entry in both the *Alien* and *Predator* franchise had been rated R. They were seen as not having shied away from the grotesque and monstrous aspects of their narratives. Now, suddenly, when those two iconic characters were to meet face to face on screen for the first time, however, the impact of that meeting would be blunted by strictures of PG-13. In practice, the PG-13 rating meant less blood, less chest-bursting, and fewer human

skinning ... all staples of the popular franchises. Horror fans, such as those at the website *Whatculture* referred to PG-13 as "*The Diet Coke of horror*" and concluded that the genre, in this format simply "*doesn't work*."⁵⁸

On one hand, social scientists feared that PG-13 ratings would open the doorway to damage young psyches with aforementioned ratings creep. On the other hand, horror fans were alienated by the possibility that their favorite franchises, and even new films in the genre would be hamstrung by attempting to appeal to a wider audience. A study conducted in 2011 found at least some evidence that the watchdogs had the upper hand in the debate, at least in terms of factual evidence. According to the authors of "MPAA Ratings Creep: A Longitudinal Analysis of the PG-13 Rating Category in U.S. Movies," there were "increases in violent content in the PG-13 rating" during the period data was analyzed, 1988, 1997 and 2006, showcasing what the authors termed a "leniency towards violent content" by the M.P.A.A.⁵⁹

Even though the battle lines were drawn in the 2000s by those who saw the PG-13 rating as a slippery slope towards child endangerment and those who saw it as a watering down of the horror genre's very character, one demographic was pleased, the aforementioned accountants.

According to the article "Scary Business: Horror at the North American Box Office, 2006-2016," the average budgets for "PG-13 horror films are significantly higher (37.4 million) than R rated films (25.1 million), as are box office returns (81.6 million vs. 51.5 million)."⁶⁰ Right there, perhaps is the true motive behind the move to so many PG-13 horror movies in the 2000s: the necessity to broaden the genre's appeal in the new century.

In addition to *The Ring*, *AVP*, and *White Noise*, other notable PG-13 horror films of the 2000s include *They* (2002), *Darkness Falls* (2003), *The Grudge* (2004), *Boogeyman* (2005), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Fog* (2005), *When a Stranger Calls* (2005), *Pulse* (2006), *Stay Alive* (2006), *The Messengers* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), *One Missed Call* (2008), *Prom Night* (2008), *Shutter* (2008), and *Drag Me to Hell* (2009).

Meanwhile, the 2000s is the demarcation point in horror films in terms of special effects presentation. In decades past, practical effects had dominated the genre. By the 2000s, CGI computer generated imagery had become the industry standard. For horror aficionados, this was not a happy trade-off. CGI monsters, like werewolves, tended to look cartoonish rather than real. It wasn't merely that they looked unreal, but that they moved in unreal fashion, because gravity was not a factor for these digital creations the way it is in our reality. Similarly, CGI blood spatter simply could not prove as gloriously messy and chaotic as the blood floods of eras gone by.

Auteurs: The Great Maestros in Decline

The 2000s was the last era, in a very real sense, that the great horror maestros who cut their teeth in the cinema of the 1970s and 1980s contributed meaningful new work to the horror genre that they had so influenced.

Wes Craven crafted a slasher sequel, *Scream 3* (2000) and a werewolf movie, *Cursed* (2005) that suffered from post-production tinkering, rewriting and reshoots. Neither film would rank near the top of a canon that includes *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), or *Scream* (1996). Two of Craven's classic horror efforts were remade in the aughts, *Last House* and *Hills*, and his best film of the decade was likely a non-horror effort, the thriller *Red Eye* (2005).

John Carpenter, maestro of *Halloween* (1978), *The Fog* (1981), *The Thing* (1982) and many more classics traveled a similarly uninspiring journey in the first decade of the 21st century. Both *Halloween* (2007) and *The Fog* (2005) were remade by others, and even *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) was remade as a straight-up, glossy action picture. Carpenter's only directing contribution of the decade was *John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars* (2001), a fascinating return to his Howard Hawks' western genre obsession, but a film that met the most savage reviews of his long and impressive career. He did not direct another feature film until 2010's *The Ward*.

Tobe Hooper had a career renaissance of sorts in the 2000s, though once more working in low-budget horror, his roots in the industry. His efforts, *Crocodile* (2000), *Mortuary* (2005) and *The Toolbox Murders* (2005) were weird, wild and not seen by many. At the very least, he

seemed happy to continue creating genre films, and that same old corkscrew Hooper energy was on tap.

Of the classic 70s wild bunch, it was George A. Romero who had the greatest success in the 2000s. It had been some time since his last zombie film, *Day of the Dead* (1985), but the aughts gave him the opportunity to direct the three final installments of the saga, the mainstream *Land of the Dead* (2005), the found-footage *Diary of the Dead* (2008) and the vastly underrated coda, *Survival of the Dead* (2009). For some long-time fans and critics, it was wonderful to have Romero back, working on the franchise that had made his name in the industry. Others found much to complain about in the new films, including a reliance on CGI gore rather than practical effects.

Sam Raimi also returned to the genre twice in the first decade of the 21st century, bookending it in fact with a gothic horror piece, *The Gift* (2000) and the manic, over-the-top *Drag Me to Hell* (2009).

As these maestros toiled, in their third or fourth decade of crafting horror films, new voices also rose in the aughts. The most controversial was Rob Zombie, who directed four films in the era. Two of those films came straight from his warped but fertile imagination, the Chainsaw-styled pastiche *House of 1000 Corpses* (2002) and its road-trip sequel, *The Devil's Rejects* (2005). These efforts, featuring redneck characters, colorful language and gore aplenty, generally met with favor from horror fans.

Zombie's other films of the decade, the remake of Carpenter's *Halloween* (2007) and its sequel, *Halloween 2* (2009), were lightning rods for controversy. In both films, Carpenter's spare, neo-classic approach was replaced by gory violence, white-trash-type characters, and a focus on Michael Myers' psychology, rather than his impenetrable nature as "The Shape."

Some fans appreciated the individuality of Zombie's film, especially in a franchise that had ended with ignominy and shame in *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), while others could simply not stomach Zombie's cynical world view and gutter approach to the franchise. But love or hate the *Halloween* remakes, they certainly rank near the top of any *Halloween* spin-offs in terms of artistic vision. Those films are uniquely his.

Another brash voice rose to prominence in the 2000s. Eli Roth



CGI special effects became the norm in the 2000s horror cinema. Here, an invisible scientist is rendered (skinless) using that technology in Paul Verhoeven's *Hollow Man* (2000). Left: Elisabeth Shue, right: the computer-generated representation of Kevin Bacon's Dr. Sebastian Caine.

burst onto the horror scene with *Cabin Fever* (2003), but that film, with its homages to *The Evil Dead* and *The Last House on the Left*, and its quirky almost campy sequences, was nothing compared to what came next.

In 2005, Roth's *Hostel* debuted (right on the heels of *Saw* [2004]), and the idea of torture porn was cemented in the popular culture. *Hostel*, and the sequel, *Hostel II*,

which Roth also directed, featured Americans in Slovakia being exploited as raw materials in a torture shop of extreme sadism and reach. These films were gut-wrenching, it was true, but many critics missed the fact that they were also suspenseful, imaginative, and steeped in the culture of the moment. Critics complained vociferously about Roth's focus on torture and violence, but

America was waging its War on Terror and, at least implicitly, condoning torture at the same time. Roth's art was simply—and effectively—mirroring the larger global atmosphere.

Ti West was another up-and-comer at the end of the decade. Although his *Cabin Fever 2: Spring Fever* went through creative difficulties, his 2009 effort, *The House of the Devil* captured the imagination of the horror blogosphere with its 1980s touches, and slow-burn approach to the material. In the 2010s, West went even further, with new efforts such as *The Innkeepers* (2012), *You're Next* (2012), *V/H/S/* (2012) and *The Sacrament* (2013).

France gave the horror film Alexandre Aja in the 2000s, another auteur. He burst onto the scene with *High Tension* (2003), a frenetic effort that positioned the slasher and the final girl in the same physical body for the first time, perhaps, in the genre's history. Next, he directed the stunning, brutal and brilliant, at least in terms of War on Terror cultural criticism, remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* in 2006. Next came another remake, *Mirrors* (2008), which was not as well received as the previous two efforts.

Even as Zombie, Roth, West, and Aja rose, it became apparent that the cinema of the 21st century was vastly different than that of the closing years of the 20th century. Aside from Zombie, there were few horror directors working, few heirs to Carpenter, Craven, Hooper, Romero, Raimi or Cronenberg, who proved that they could operate in a number of sub-genres (alien invasion, road trip gone awry, zombie,



Two more views of *Hollow Man*'s stunning (for their time) CGI effects. Top: Elisabeth Shue's Dr. McKay is menaced by an invisible, bandaged Dr. Caine (Kevin Bacon). Bottom: Cain's team (facing the camera, left to right: Josh Brolin, Elisabeth Shue and Greg Grunberg) monitor the process of making Dr. Caine invisible.



Genre maestro John Carpenter made only one film in the 2000s, the critically derided—but fascinating—*Ghosts of Mars* (2001). Pictured here is Big Daddy Mars (Richard Cetrone), who has established dominion over a human colony on the red planet.

found footage, slasher, ghost story) and have audiences follow them for the ride.

The voice of the director was becoming less and less important in the new century, which meant that new auteurs were not coming out of Hollywood. Directors such as James Wan, or Darren Lynn-Bousman were known for the *Saw* films during the decade but did not, in the 2000s transfer that success to other horror films.

Why was this the case?

Horror films had become, in the new century, brand names. Remakes, J-Horror, and even new franchises such as *Final Destination*, *Wrong Turn* and *Saw*, were seen as on-going cash cows whose creativity lay in the brand; in the work of the producer overseeing multiple entries. Rather than being seen as the driving creative force of these enterprises, directors were becoming simply hired hands to take on the next entry.

But by the entry after that, they could be gone; replaced by another jobbing individual.

The Horror Blogosphere

One of the most fascinating and Web 2.0 trends involves “blogs” or web logs. These are online journals with daily or weekly entries. In the mid-2000s, blogs took off, and many new voices were added to the constellation of horror critics and aficionados.

The greatest virtue of blogging, perhaps, is that the format—instant mass publication—eliminates elitist gatekeeping from the process of writing about any chosen topic, including the horror film. In previous decades some gatekeepers at periodicals, or in publishing houses could prevent new and worthwhile authors from being read.

Blogger, which was launched in 1999, and Wordpress, which was launched in 2003, helped to change all that. For the first time, perhaps in history, the ranks of horror scholars could be filled by writers not belonging to one particular ethnicity, demographic, gender or background. Without gatekeepers to hold back artistry and creativity, women’s voices, gay voices, Gen X voices and others finally moved to the forefront of horror criticism,

to the betterment of the genre as a whole. Appreciation for the horror film as a format, blog readers learned, is widespread, and features diverse writers, and diverse interests.

Accordingly, the 2000s gave rise to a number of worthwhile, skilled new voices in horror scholarship and criticism. By the late 2000s, these blogs were often daily stops for readers, including this author, who began his own blog in 2005, and which is still going as of this writing ... more than 11,000 posts later.

It would be impossible to name all the horror blogs this author frequented from probably 2006–2012, but they include JM Cozzoli's Zombo's Closet of Horror, Stacie Ponder's Final Girl, Pax Romano's Billy Loves Stu, and Brian Solomon's The Vault of Horror.

On a good day, an intrepid horror movie fan could read engaging and provocative new thoughts about the horror movie format at all of these blogs, and at Day of the Woman, Groovy Age of Horror, Kindertrauma, Theofantastique, The Drunken Severed Head, and more. Many of these fantastic bloggers banded together in the latter part of the decade to form a kind of "Avengers" team of horror bloggers called The League of Tana Tea Drinkers.

And, at least for a while, horror bloggers could also contribute their own stories and other stories on an aggregation site called Horror Blips, that was popular in the age of *Twilight*, before going silent in 2010.

Predictably, some established voices and periodicals complained about blogs and the takeover of writing



George A. Romero, father of the living dead, pictured here on the set of 1985's *Day of the Dead*, had a career renaissance in the 2000s, directing no less than three new chapters of the living dead saga, including *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2008) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009).



Director Alexandre Aja (left) and scribe Gregory Levasseur on the set of *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006).

on movies by "amateurs." They didn't like that gate-keeping had been removed. Yet in the age of J-Horror, Remakes and zombies, the horror film community grew more multi-faceted and multi-cultural, it established ties throughout all corners of the net, it shared viewpoints

and philosophies on film, and pushed the boundaries of understanding about the genre and what it accomplishes.

Films long left unexamined were exhumed, often with great passion, and explored as having new, unexcavated meanings. For this author, certainly, the blogs mentioned here, and others too, represent a golden age of horror film scholarship and appreciation in American society. The worst part of researching this book was discovering how many blogs had become dead links or stopped posting by 2020.

It is true, of course, that not all blogs are created equal (just the way all movies are not created equal). But the bad blogs, with the bad writers, simply never gained

steam, and natural selection took over. They went extinct in short order. Meanwhile, the good blogs and good writers grew audiences that, in the heyday of 2005–2012, had readerships in the millions. From 2012 on, however, the great blogger awakening began to recede. Most bloggers are not paid for their work. They thrive, instead, on their own enthusiasm for their subject. But the grind of having to create quality work, every day, to maintain an audience, simply became too much in some cases, given the scant financial rewards.

And, the YouTubers were in the offing, with some bloggers heading to that format to continue the appreciation of horror as TV stars of a sort.